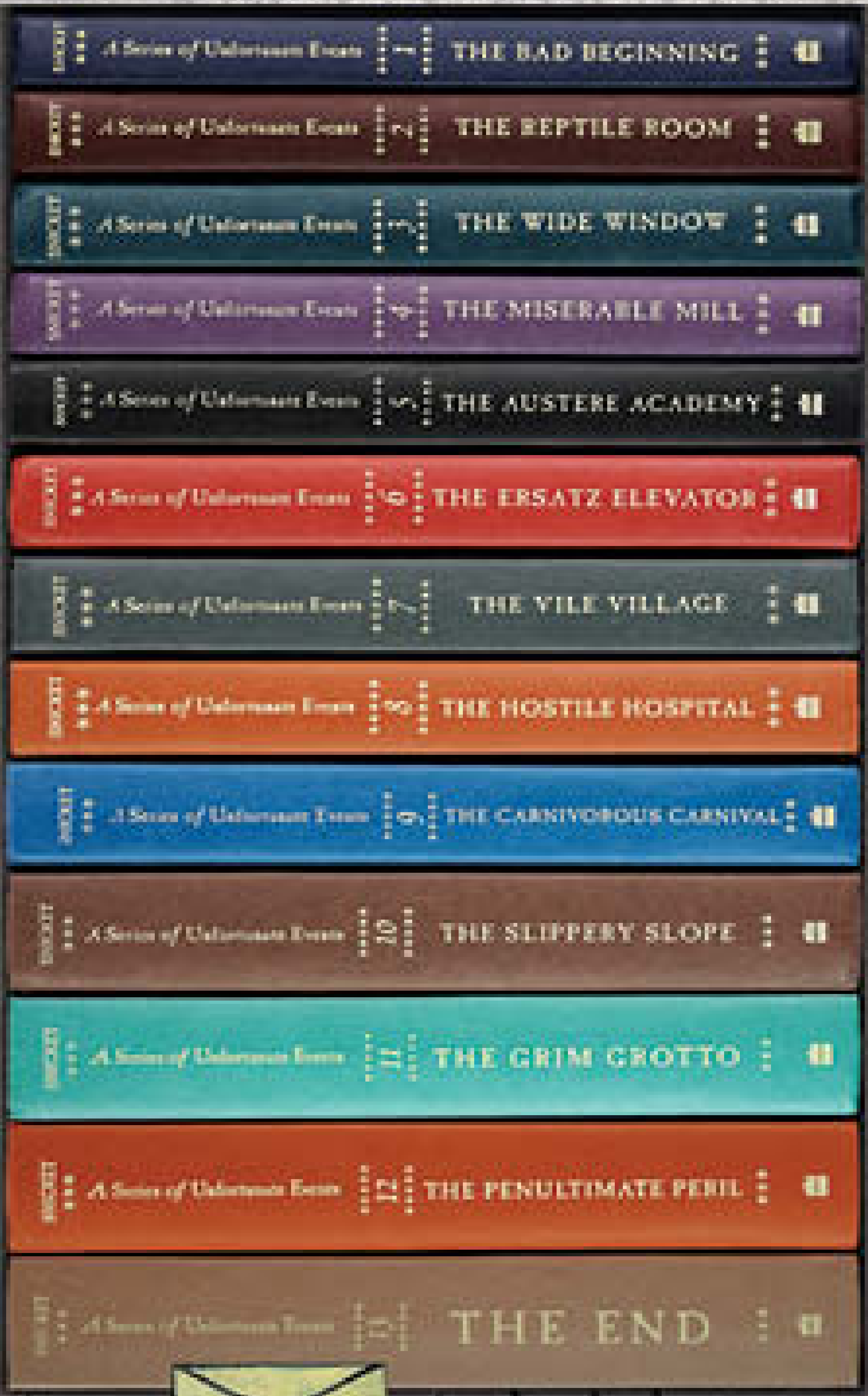
A Series of Unfortunate Events

COLLECTION: BOOKS 1–13
with BONUS MATERIAL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by LEMONY SNICKET

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To My Kind Editor
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A Series of Unfortunate Events #13: The End

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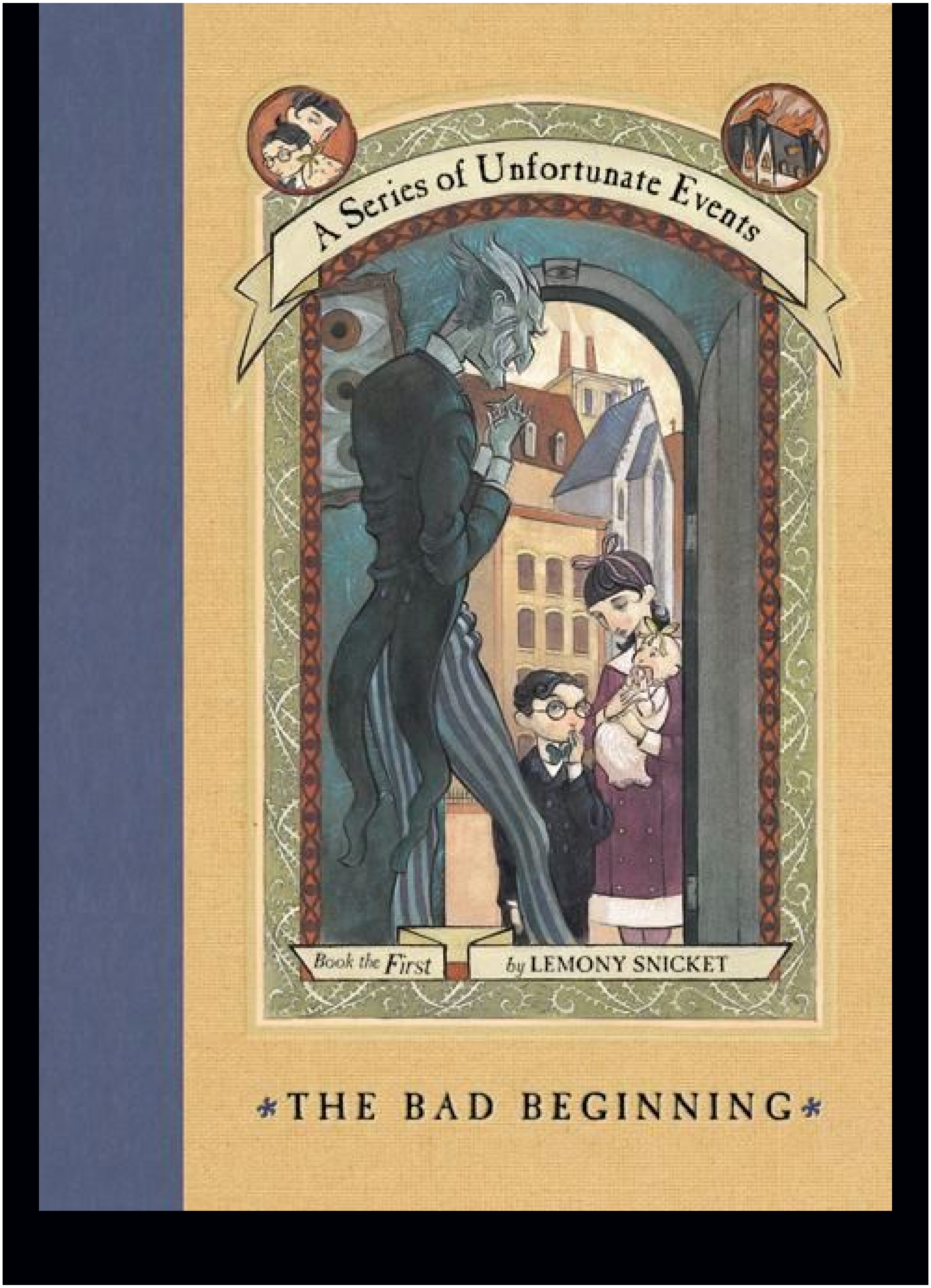
Dire Diversions
About the Author
About the Publisher

A Series of Unfortunate Events #1: The Bad Beginning


A Series of Unfortunate Events
Book the First
by LEMONY SNICKET
THE BAD BEGINNING

A Series of Unfortunate Events

BOOK the First

THE BAD BEGINNING

by **LEMONY SNICKET**

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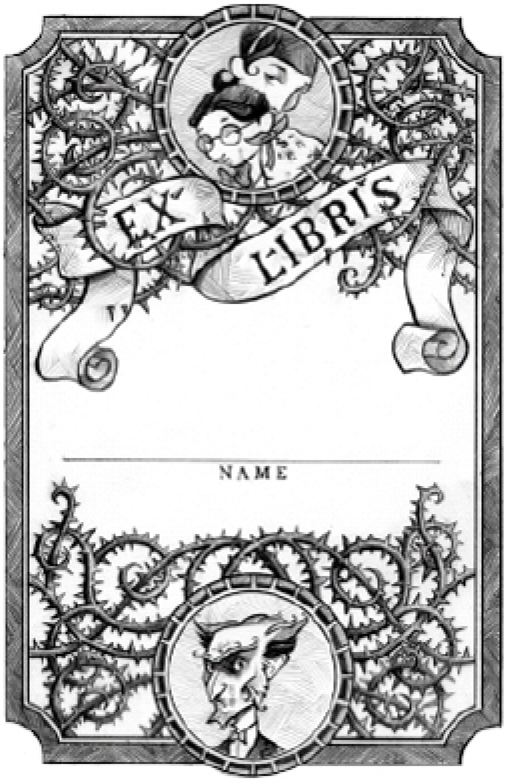
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Dear Reader,

I’m sorry to say that the book you are holding in your hands is extremely unpleasant. It tells an unhappy tale about three very unlucky children. Even though they are charming and clever, the Baudelaire siblings lead lives filled with misery and woe. From the very first page of this book when the children are at the beach and receive terrible news, continuing on through the entire story, disaster lurks at their heels. One might say they are magnets for misfortune.

In this short book alone, the three youngsters encounter a greedy and repulsive villain, itchy clothing, a disastrous fire, a plot to steal their fortune, and cold porridge for breakfast.

It is my sad duty to write down these unpleasant tales, but there is nothing stopping you from putting this book down at once and reading something happy, if you prefer that sort of thing.

With all due respect,

Lemony Snicket

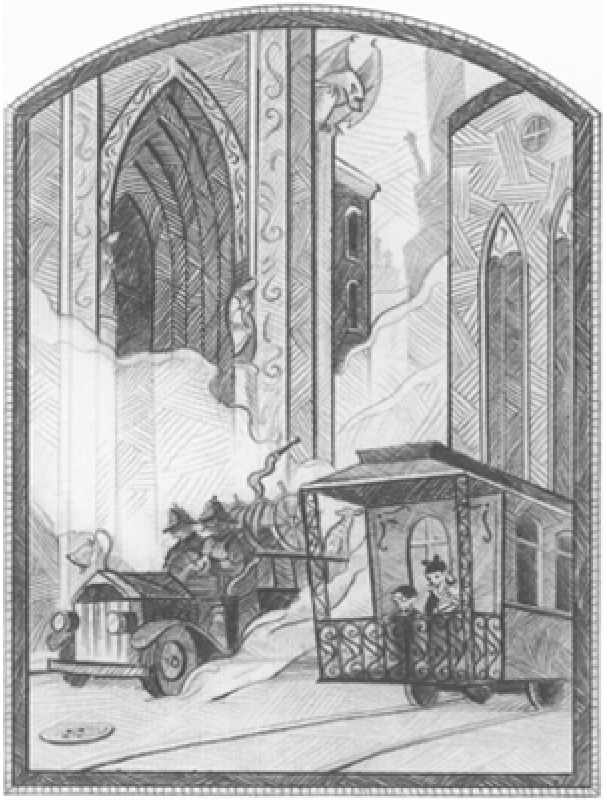
Lemony Snicket

A Series of Unfortunate Events

LEMONY SNICKET

To Beatrice—

darling, dearest, dead,



CHAPTER
One

If you are interested in stories with happy endings, you would be better off reading some other book. In this book, not only is there no happy ending, there is no happy beginning and very few happy things in the middle. This is because not very many happy things happened in the lives of the three Baudelaire youngsters. Violet, Klaus, and Sunny Baudelaire were intelligent children, and they were charming, and resourceful, and had pleasant facial features, but they were extremely unlucky, and most everything that happened to them was rife with misfortune, misery, and despair. I'm sorry to tell you this, but that is how the story goes.

Their misfortune began one day at Briny Beach. The three Baudelaire children lived with their parents in an enormous mansion at the heart of a dirty and busy city, and occasionally their parents gave them permission to take a rickety trolley—the word "rickety," you probably know, here means "unsteady" or "likely to collapse"—alone to the seashore, where they would spend the day as a sort of vacation as long as they were home for dinner. This particular morning it was gray and cloudy, which didn't bother the Baudelaire youngsters one bit. When it was hot and sunny, Briny Beach was crowded with tourists and it was impossible to find a good place to lay one's blanket. On gray and cloudy days, the Baudelaires had the beach to themselves to do what they liked.

Violet Baudelaire, the eldest, liked to skip rocks. Like most fourteen-year-olds, she was right-handed, so the rocks skipped farther across the murky water when Violet used her right hand than when she used her left. As she skipped rocks, she was looking out at the horizon and thinking about an invention she wanted to build. Anyone who knew Violet well could tell she was thinking hard, because her long hair was tied up in a ribbon to keep it out of her eyes. Violet had a real knack for inventing and building strange devices, so her brain was often filled with images of pulleys, levers, and gears, and she never wanted to be distracted by something as trivial as her hair. This morning she was thinking about how to construct a device that could retrieve a rock after you had skipped it into the ocean.

Klaus Baudelaire, the middle child, and the only boy, liked to examine creatures in tide-pools. Klaus was a little older than twelve and wore glasses, which made him look intelligent. He *was* intelligent. The Baudelaire parents had an enormous library in their mansion, a room filled with thousands of books on nearly every subject. Being only twelve, Klaus of course had not read all of the books in the Baudelaire library, but he had read a great many of them and had retained a lot of the information from his readings. He knew how to tell an alligator from a crocodile. He knew who killed Julius Caesar. And he knew much about the tiny, slimy animals found at Briny Beach, which he was examining now.

Sunny Baudelaire, the youngest, liked to bite things. She was an infant, and very small for her age, scarcely larger than a boot. What she lacked in size, however, she made up for with the size and sharpness of her four teeth. Sunny was at an age where one mostly speaks in a series of unintelligible shrieks. Except when she used the few actual words in her vocabulary, like “bottle,” “mommy,” and “bite,” most people had trouble understanding what it was that Sunny was saying. For instance, this morning she was saying “Gack!” over and over, which probably meant, “Look at that mysterious figure emerging from the fog!”

Sure enough, in the distance along the misty shore of Briny Beach there could be seen a tall figure striding toward the Baudelaire children. Sunny had already been staring and shrieking at the figure for some time when Klaus looked up from the spiny crab he was examining, and saw it too. He reached over and touched Violet’s arm, bringing her out of her inventing thoughts.

“Look at that,” Klaus said, and pointed toward the figure. It was drawing closer, and the children could see a few details. It was about the size of an adult, except its head was tall, and rather square.

“What do you think it is?” Violet asked.

“I don’t know,” Klaus said, squinting at it, “but it seems to be moving right toward us.”

“We’re alone on the beach,” Violet said, a little nervously. “There’s nobody else it could be moving toward.” She felt the slender, smooth stone in her left hand, which she had been about to try to skip as far as she could. She had a sudden thought to throw it at the figure, because it seemed so frightening.

“It only seems scary,” Klaus said, as if reading his sister’s thoughts, “because of all the mist.”

This was true. As the figure reached them, the children saw with relief that it was not anybody frightening at all, but somebody they knew: Mr. Poe. Mr. Poe was a friend of Mr. and Mrs. Baudelaire’s whom the children had met many times at dinner parties. One of the things Violet, Klaus, and Sunny really liked about their parents was that they didn’t send their children away when they had company over, but allowed them to join the adults at the dinner table and participate in the conversation as long as they helped clear the table. The children remembered Mr. Poe because he always had a cold and was constantly excusing himself from the table to have a fit of coughing in the next room.

Mr. Poe took off his top hat, which had made his head look large and square in the fog, and stood for a moment, coughing loudly into a white handkerchief. Violet and Klaus moved forward to shake his hand and say how do you do.

“How do you do?” said Violet.

“How do you do?” said Klaus.

“Odo yow!” said Sunny.

“Fine, thank you,” said Mr. Poe, but he looked very sad. For a few seconds nobody said anything, and the children wondered what Mr. Poe was doing there at Briny Beach, when he should have been at the bank in the city, where he worked. He was not dressed for the beach.

“It’s a nice day,” Violet said finally, making conversation. Sunny made a noise that sounded like an angry bird, and Klaus picked her up and held her.

“Yes, it is a nice day,” Mr. Poe said absently, staring out at the empty beach. “I’m afraid I have some very bad news for you children.”

The three Baudelaire siblings looked at him. Violet, with some embarrassment, felt the stone in her left hand and was glad she had not thrown it at Mr. Poe.

“Your parents,” Mr. Poe said, “have perished in a terrible fire.”

The children didn’t say anything.

“They perished,” Mr. Poe said, “in a fire that destroyed the entire house. I’m very, very sorry to tell you this, my dears.”

Violet took her eyes off Mr. Poe and stared out at the ocean. Mr. Poe had never called the Baudelaire children “my dears” before. She understood the words he was saying but thought he must be joking, playing a terrible joke on her and her brother and sister.

“‘Perished,’” Mr. Poe said, “means ‘killed.’”

“We *know* what the word ‘perished’ means,” Klaus said, crossly. He did know what the word “perished” meant, but he was still having trouble understanding exactly what it was that Mr. Poe had said. It seemed to him that Mr. Poe must somehow have misspoken.

“The fire department arrived, of course,” Mr. Poe said, “but they were too late. The entire house was engulfed in fire. It burned to the ground.”

Klaus pictured all the books in the library, going up in flames. Now he'd never read all of them.

Mr. Poe coughed several times into his handkerchief before continuing. "I was sent to retrieve you here, and to take you to my home, where you'll stay for some time while we figure things out. I am the executor of your parents' estate. That means I will be handling their enormous fortune and figuring out where you children will go. When Violet comes of age, the fortune will be yours, but the bank will take charge of it until you are old enough."

Although he said he was the executor, Violet felt like Mr. Poe was the executioner. He had simply walked down the beach to them and changed their lives forever.

"Come with me," Mr. Poe said, and held out his hand. In order to take it, Violet had to drop the stone she was holding. Klaus took Violet's other hand, and Sunny took Klaus's other hand, and in that manner the three Baudelaire children—the Baudelaire orphans, now—were led away from the beach and from their previous lives.

CHAPTER
Two

It is useless for me to describe to you how terrible Violet, Klaus, and even Sunny felt in the time that followed. If you have ever lost someone very important to you, then you already know how it feels, and if you haven't, you cannot possibly imagine it. For the Baudelaire children, it was of course especially terrible because they had lost both their parents at the same time, and for several days they felt so miserable they could scarcely get out of bed. Klaus found he had little interest in books. The gears in Violet's inventive brain seemed to stop. And even Sunny, who of course was too young to really understand what was going on, bit things with less enthusiasm.

Of course, it didn’t make things any easier that they had lost their home as well, and all their possessions. As I’m sure you know, to be in one’s own room, in one’s own bed, can often make a bleak situation a little better, but the beds of the Baudelaire orphans had been reduced to charred rubble. Mr. Poe had taken them to the remains of the Baudelaire mansion to see if anything had been unharmed, and it was terrible: Violet’s microscope had fused together in the heat of the fire, Klaus’s favorite pen had turned to ash, and all of Sunny’s teething rings had melted. Here and there, the children could see traces of the enormous home they had loved: fragments of their grand piano, an elegant bottle in which Mr. Baudelaire kept brandy, the scorched cushion of the windowseat where their mother liked to sit and read.

Their home destroyed, the Baudelaires had to recuperate from their terrible loss in the Poe household, which was not at all agreeable. Mr. Poe was scarcely at home, because he was very busy attending to the Baudelaire affairs, and when he was home he was often coughing so much he could barely have a conversation. Mrs. Poe purchased clothing for the orphans that was in grotesque colors, and itched. And the two Poe children—Edgar and Albert—were loud and obnoxious boys with whom the Baudelaires had to share a tiny room that smelled of some sort of ghastly flower.

But even given the surroundings, the children had mixed feelings when, over a dull dinner of boiled chicken, boiled potatoes and blanched—the word “blanched” here means “boiled”—string beans, Mr. Poe announced that they were to leave his household the next morning.

“Good,” said Albert, who had a piece of potato stuck between his teeth. “Now we can get our room back. I’m tired of sharing it. Violet and Klaus are always moping around, and are never any fun.”

“And the baby bites,” Edgar said, tossing a chicken bone to the floor as if he were an animal in a zoo and not the son of a well-respected member of the banking community.

“Where will we go?” Violet asked nervously.

Mr. Poe opened his mouth to say something, but erupted into a brief fit of coughing. “I have made arrangements,” he said finally, “for you to be raised by a distant relative of yours who lives on the other side of town. His name is Count Olaf.”

Violet, Klaus, and Sunny looked at one another, unsure of what to think. On one hand, they didn’t want to live with the Poes any longer. On the other hand, they had never heard of Count Olaf and didn’t know what he would be like.

“Your parents’ will,” Mr. Poe said, “instructs that you be raised in the most convenient way possible. Here in the city, you’ll be used to your surroundings, and this Count Olaf is the only relative who lives within the urban limits.”

Klaus thought this over for a minute as he swallowed a chewy bit of bean. “But our parents never mentioned Count Olaf to us. Just how is he related to us, exactly?”

Mr. Poe sighed and looked down at Sunny, who was biting a fork and listening closely. “He is either a third cousin four times removed, or a fourth cousin three times removed. He is not your closest relative on the family tree, but he is the closest geographically. That’s why—”

“If he lives in the city,” Violet said, “why didn’t our parents ever invite him over?”

“Possibly because he was very busy,” Mr. Poe said. “He’s an actor by trade, and often travels around the world with various theater companies.”

“I thought he was a count,” Klaus said.

“He is both a count and an actor,” Mr. Poe said. “Now, I don’t mean to cut short our dinner, but you children have to pack up your things, and I have to return to the bank to do some more work. Like your new legal guardian, I am very busy myself.”

The three Baudelaire children had many more questions for Mr. Poe, but he had already stood up from the table, and with a slight wave of his hand departed from the room. They heard him coughing into his handkerchief and then the front door creaked shut as he left the house.

“Well,” Mrs. Poe said, “you three had better start packing. Edgar, Albert, please help me clear the table.”

The Baudelaire orphans went to the bedroom and glumly packed their few belongings. Klaus looked distastefully at each ugly shirt Mrs. Poe had bought for him as he folded them and put them into a small suitcase. Violet looked around the cramped, smelly room in which they had been living. And Sunny crawled around solemnly biting each of Edgar and Albert’s shoes, leaving small teeth marks in each one so she would not be forgotten. From time to time, the Baudelaire children looked at one another, but with their future such a mystery they could think of nothing to say. At bedtime, they tossed and turned all night, scarcely getting any sleep between the loud snoring of Edgar and Albert and their own worried thoughts. Finally, Mr. Poe knocked on the door and stuck his head into the bedroom.

“Rise and shine, Baudelaires,” he said. “It’s time for you to go to Count Olaf’s.”

Violet looked around the crowded bedroom, and even though she didn’t like it, she felt very nervous about leaving. “Do we have to go right this minute?” she asked.

Mr. Poe opened his mouth to speak, but had to cough a few times before he began. “Yes you do. I’m dropping you off on my way to the bank, so we need to leave as soon as possible. Please get out of bed and get dressed,” he said briskly. The word “briskly” here means “quickly, so as to get the Baudelaire children to leave the house.”

The Baudelaire children left the house. Mr. Poe’s automobile rumbled along the cobblestone streets of the city toward the neighborhood where Count Olaf lived. They passed horse-drawn carriages and motorcycles along Doldrum Drive. They passed the Fickle Fountain, an elaborately carved monument that occasionally spat out water in which young children played. They passed an enormous pile of dirt where the Royal Gardens once stood. Before too long, Mr. Poe drove his car down a narrow alley lined with houses made of pale brick and stopped halfway down the block.

“Here we are,” Mr. Poe said, in a voice undoubtedly meant to be cheerful. “Your new home.”

The Baudelaire children looked out and saw the prettiest house on the block. The bricks had been cleaned very well, and through the wide and open windows one could see an assortment of well-groomed plants. Standing in the doorway, with her hand on the shiny brass doorknob, was an older woman, smartly dressed, who was smiling at the children. In one hand she carried a flowerpot.

“Hello there!” she called out. “You must be the children Count Olaf is adopting.”

Violet opened the door of the automobile and got out to shake the woman’s hand. It felt firm and warm, and for the first time in a long while Violet felt as if her life and the lives of her siblings might turn out well after all. “Yes,” she said. “Yes, we are. I am Violet Baudelaire, and this is my brother Klaus and my sister Sunny. And this is Mr. Poe, who has been arranging things for us since the death of our parents.”

“Yes, I heard about the accident,” the woman said, as everyone said how do you do. “I am Justice Strauss.”

“That’s an unusual first name,” Klaus remarked.

“It is my title,” she explained, “not my first name. I serve as a judge on the High Court.”

“How fascinating,” Violet said. “And are you married to Count Olaf?”

“Goodness me no,” Justice Strauss said. “I don’t actually know him that well. He is my next-door neighbor.”

The children looked from the well-scrubbed house of Justice Strauss to the dilapidated one next door. The bricks were stained with soot and grime. There were only two small windows, which were closed with the shades drawn even though it was a nice day. Rising above the windows was a tall and dirty tower that tilted slightly to the left. The front door needed to be repainted, and carved in the middle of it was an image of an eye. The entire building sagged to the side, like a crooked tooth.

“Oh!” said Sunny, and everyone knew what she meant. She meant, “What a terrible place! I don’t want to live there at all!”

“Well, it was nice to meet you,” Violet said to Justice Strauss.

“Yes,” said Justice Strauss, gesturing to her flowerpot. “Perhaps one day you could come over and help me with my gardening.”

“That would be very pleasant,” Violet said, very sadly. It would, of course, be very pleasant to help Justice Strauss with her gardening, but Violet could not help thinking that it would be far more pleasant to live in Justice Strauss’s house, instead of Count Olaf’s. What kind of a man, Violet wondered, would carve an image of an eye into his front door?

Mr. Poe tipped his hat to Justice Strauss, who smiled at the children and disappeared into her lovely house. Klaus stepped forward and knocked on Count Olaf’s door, his knuckles rapping right in the middle of the carved eye. There was a pause, and then the door creaked open and the children saw Count Olaf for the first time.

“Hello hello hello,” Count Olaf said in a wheezy whisper. He was very tall and very thin, dressed in a gray suit that had many dark stains on it. His face was unshaven, and rather than two eyebrows, like most human beings have, he had just one long one. His eyes were very, very shiny, which made him look both hungry and angry. “Hello, my children. Please step into your new home, and wipe your feet outside so no mud gets indoors.”

As they stepped into the house, Mr. Poe behind them, the Baudelaire orphans realized what a ridiculous thing Count Olaf had just said. The room in which they found themselves was the dirtiest they had ever seen, and a little bit of mud from outdoors wouldn’t have made a bit of difference. Even by the dim light of the one bare lightbulb that hung from the ceiling, the three children could see that everything in this room was filthy, from the stuffed head of a lion which was nailed to the wall to the bowl of apple cores which sat on a small wooden table. Klaus willed himself not to cry as he looked around.

“This room looks like it needs a little work,” Mr. Poe said, peering around in the gloom.

“I realize that my humble home isn’t as fancy as the Baudelaire mansion,” Count Olaf said, “but perhaps with a bit of your money we could fix it up a little nicer.”

Mr. Poe’s eyes widened in surprise, and his coughs echoed in the dark room before he spoke. “The Baudelaire fortune,” he said sternly, “will not be used for such matters. In fact, it will not be used at all, until Violet is of age.”

Count Olaf turned to Mr. Poe with a glint in his eye like an angry dog. For a moment Violet thought he was going to strike Mr. Poe across the face. But then he swallowed—the children could see his Adam’s apple bob in his skinny throat—and shrugged his patchy shoulders.

“All right then,” he said. “It’s the same to me. Thank you very much, Mr. Poe, for bringing them here. Children, I will now show you to your room.”

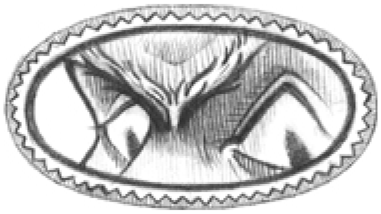
“Good-bye, Violet, Klaus, and Sunny,” Mr. Poe said, stepping back through the front door. “I hope you will be very happy here. I will continue to see you occasionally, and you can always contact me at the bank if you have any questions.”

“But we don’t even know where the bank is,” Klaus said.

“I have a map of the city,” Count Olaf said. “Good-bye, Mr. Poe.”

He leaned forward to shut the door, and the Baudelaire orphans were too overcome with despair to get a last glimpse of Mr. Poe. They now wished they could all stay at the Poe household, even though it smelled. Rather than looking at the door, then, the orphans looked down, and saw that although Count Olaf was wearing shoes, he wasn’t wearing any socks. They could see, in the space of pale skin between his tattered trouser cuff and his black shoe, that Count Olaf had an image of an eye tattooed on his ankle, matching the eye on his front door. They wondered how many other eyes were in Count Olaf’s house, and whether, for the rest of their lives, they would always feel as though Count Olaf were watching them even when he wasn’t nearby.

CHAPTER
Three



I don't know if you've ever noticed this, but first impressions are often entirely wrong. You can look at a painting for the first time, for example, and not like it at all, but after looking at it a little longer you may find it very pleasing. The first time you try Gorgonzola cheese you may find it too strong, but when you are older you may want to eat nothing but Gorgonzola cheese. Klaus, when Sunny was born, did not like her at all, but by the time she was six weeks old the two of them were thick as thieves. Your initial opinion on just about anything may change over time.

I wish I could tell you that the Baudelaires' first impressions of Count Olaf and his house were incorrect, as first impressions so often are. But these impressions—that Count Olaf was a horrible person, and his house a depressing pigsty—were absolutely correct. During the first few days after the orphans' arrival at Count Olaf's, Violet, Klaus, and Sunny attempted to make themselves feel at home, but it was really no use. Even though Count Olaf's house was quite large, the three children were placed together in one filthy bedroom that had only one small bed in it. Violet and Klaus took turns sleeping in it, so that every other night one of them was in the bed and the other was sleeping on the hard wooden floor, and the bed's mattress was so lumpy it was difficult to say who was more uncomfortable. To make a bed for Sunny, Violet removed the dusty curtains from the curtain rod that hung over the bedroom's one window and bunched them together to form a sort of cushion, just big enough for her sister. However, without curtains over the cracked glass, the sun streamed through the window every morning, so the children woke up early and sore each day. Instead of a closet, there was a large cardboard box that had once held a refrigerator and would now hold the three children's clothes, all piled in a heap. Instead of toys, books, or other things to amuse the youngsters, Count Olaf had provided a small pile of rocks. And the only decoration on the peeling walls was a large and ugly painting of an eye, matching the one on Count Olaf's ankle and all over the house.

But the children knew, as I'm sure you know, that the worst surroundings in the world can be tolerated if the people in them are interesting and kind. Count Olaf was neither interesting nor kind; he was demanding, short-tempered, and bad-smelling. The only good thing to be said for Count Olaf is that he wasn't around very often. When the children woke up and chose their clothing out of the refrigerator box, they would walk into the kitchen and find a list of instructions left for them by Count Olaf, who would often not appear until nighttime. Most of the day he spent out of the house, or up in the high tower, where the children were forbidden to go. The instructions he left for them were usually difficult chores, such as repainting the back porch or repairing the windows, and instead of a signature Count Olaf would draw an eye at the bottom of the note.

One morning his note read, "My theater troupe will be coming for dinner before tonight's performance. Have dinner ready for all ten of them by the time they arrive at seven o'clock. Buy the food, prepare it, set the table, serve dinner, clean up afterwards, and stay out of our way." Below that there was the usual eye, and underneath the note was a small sum of money for the groceries.

Violet and Klaus read the note as they ate their breakfast, which was a gray and lumpy oatmeal Count Olaf left for them each morning in a large pot on the stove. Then they looked at each other in dismay.

"None of us knows how to cook," Klaus said.

"That's true," Violet said. "I knew how to repair those windows, and how to clean the chimney, because those sorts of things interest me. But I don’t know how to cook anything except toast.”

“And sometimes you burn the toast,” Klaus said, and they smiled. They were both remembering a time when the two of them got up early to make a special breakfast for their parents. Violet had burned the toast, and their parents, smelling smoke, had run downstairs to see what the matter was. When they saw Violet and Klaus, looking forlornly at pieces of pitch-black toast, they laughed and laughed, and then made pancakes for the whole family.

“I wish they were here,” Violet said. She did not have to explain she was talking about their parents. “They would never let us stay in this dreadful place.”

“If they were here,” Klaus said, his voice rising as he got more and more upset, “we would not be with Count Olaf in the first place. I *hate* it here, Violet! I *hate* this house! I *hate* our room! I *hate* having to do all these chores, and I *hate* Count Olaf!”

“I hate it too,” Violet said, and Klaus looked at his older sister with relief. Sometimes, just saying that you hate something, and having someone agree with you, can make you feel better about a terrible situation. “I hate everything about our lives right now, Klaus,” she said, “but we have to keep our chin up.” This was an expression the children’s father had used, and it meant “try to stay cheerful.”

“You’re right,” Klaus said. “But it is very difficult to keep one’s chin up when Count Olaf keeps shoving it down.”

“Jook!” Sunny shrieked, banging on the table with her oatmeal spoon. Violet and Klaus were jerked out of their conversation and looked once again at Count Olaf’s note.

“Perhaps we could find a cookbook, and read about how to cook,” Klaus said. “It shouldn’t be that difficult to make a simple meal.”

Violet and Klaus spent several minutes opening and shutting Count Olaf’s kitchen cupboards, but there weren’t any cookbooks to be found.

“I can’t say I’m surprised,” Violet said. “We haven’t found any books in this house at all.”

“I know, “Klaus said miserably. “I miss reading very much. We must go out and look for a library sometime soon.”

“But not today,” Violet said. “Today we have to cook for ten people.”

At that moment there was a knock on the front door. Violet and Klaus looked at one another nervously.

“Who in the world would want to visit Count Olaf?” Violet wondered out loud.

“Maybe somebody wants to visit *us*,” Klaus said, without much hope. In the time since the Baudelaire parents’ death, most of the Baudelaire orphans’ friends had fallen by the wayside, an expression which here means “they stopped calling, writing, and stopping by to see any of the Baudelaires, making them very lonely.” You and I, of course, would never do this to any of our grieving acquaintances, but it is a sad truth in life that when someone has lost a loved one, friends sometimes avoid the person, just when the presence of friends is most needed.

Violet, Klaus, and Sunny walked slowly to the front door and peered through the peephole, which was in the shape of an eye. They were delighted to see Justice Strauss peering back at them, and opened the door.

“Justice Strauss!” Violet cried. “How lovely to see you.” She was about to add, “Do come in,” but then she realized that Justice Strauss would probably not want to venture into the dim and dirty room.

“Please forgive me for not stopping by sooner,” Justice Strauss said, as the Baudelaires stood awkwardly in the doorway. “I wanted to see how you children were settling in, but I had a very difficult case in the High Court and it was taking up much of my time.”

“What sort of case was it?” Klaus asked. Having been deprived of reading, he was hungry for new information.

“I can’t really discuss it,” Justice Strauss said, “because it’s official business. But I can tell you it concerns a poisonous plant and illegal use of someone’s credit card.”

“Yeeka!” Sunny shrieked, which appeared to mean “How interesting!” although of course there is no way that Sunny could understand what was being said.

Justice Strauss looked down at Sunny and laughed. “Yeeka indeed,” she said, and reached down to pat the child on the head. Sunny took Justice Strauss’s hand and bit it, gently.

“That means she likes you,” Violet explained. “She bites very, very hard if she doesn’t like you, or if you want to give her a bath.”

“I see,” Justice Strauss said. “Now then, how are you children getting on? Is there anything you desire?”

The children looked at one another, thinking of all the things they desired. Another bed, for example. A proper crib for Sunny. Curtains for the window in their room. A closet instead of a cardboard box. But what they desired most of all, of course, was not to be associated with Count Olaf in any way whatsoever. What they desired most was to be with their parents again, in their true home, but that, of course, was impossible. Violet, Klaus, and Sunny all looked down at the floor unhappily as they considered the question. Finally, Klaus spoke.

“Could we perhaps borrow a cookbook?” he said. “Count Olaf has instructed us to make dinner for his theater troupe tonight, and we can’t find a cookbook in the house.”

“Goodness,” Justice Strauss said. “Cooking dinner for an entire theater troupe seems like a lot to ask of children.”

“Count Olaf gives us a lot of responsibility,” Violet said. What she wanted to say was, “Count Olaf is an evil man,” but she was well mannered.

“Well, why don’t you come next door to my house,” Justice Strauss said, “and find a cookbook that pleases you?”

The youngsters agreed, and followed Justice Strauss out the door and over to her well-kept house. She led them through an elegant hallway smelling of flowers into an enormous room, and when they saw what was inside, they nearly fainted from delight, Klaus especially.

The room was a library. Not a public library, but a private library; that is, a large collection of books belonging to Justice Strauss. There were shelves and shelves of them, on every wall from the floor to the ceiling, and separate shelves and shelves of them in the middle of the room. The only place there weren’t books was in one corner, where there were some large, comfortable-looking chairs and a wooden table with lamps hanging over them, perfect for reading. Although it was not as big as their parents’ library, it was as cozy, and the Baudelaire children were thrilled.

“My word!” Violet said. “This is a wonderful library!”

“Thank you very much,” Justice Strauss said. “I’ve been collecting books for years, and I’m very proud of my collection. As long as you keep them in good condition, you are welcome to use any of my books, at any time. Now, the cookbooks are over here on the eastern wall. Shall we have a look at them?”

“Yes,” Violet said, “and then, if you don’t mind, I should love to look at any of your books concerning mechanical engineering. Inventing things is a great interest of mine.”

“And I would like to look at books on wolves,” Klaus said. “Recently I have been fascinated by the subject of wild animals of North America.”

“Book!” Sunny shrieked, which meant “Please don’t forget to pick out a picture book for me.”

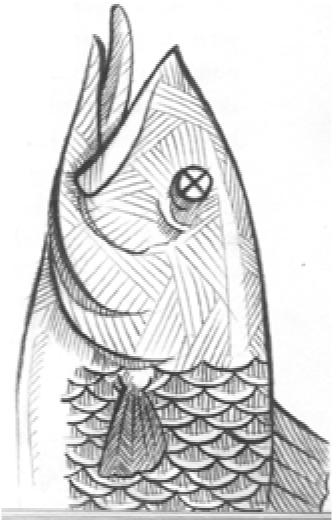
Justice Strauss smiled. “It is a pleasure to see young people interested in books,” she said. “But first I think we’d better find a good recipe, don’t you?”

The children agreed, and for thirty minutes or so they perused several cookbooks that Justice Strauss recommended. To tell you the truth, the three orphans were so excited to be out of Count Olaf's house, and in this pleasant library, that they were a little distracted and unable to concentrate on cooking. But finally Klaus found a dish that sounded delicious, and easy to make.

"Listen to this," he said. "'Puttanesca.' It's an Italian sauce for pasta. All we need to do is sauté olives, capers, anchovies, garlic, chopped parsley, and tomatoes together in a pot, and prepare spaghetti to go with it."

"That sounds easy," Violet agreed, and the Baudelaire orphans looked at one another. Perhaps, with the kind Justice Strauss and her library right next door, the children could prepare pleasant lives for themselves as easily as making puttanesca sauce for Count Olaf.

CHAPTER
Four



The Baudelaire orphans copied the puttanesca recipe from the cookbook onto a piece of scrap paper, and Justice Strauss was kind enough to escort them to the market to buy the necessary ingredients. Count Olaf had not left them very much money, but the children were able to buy everything they needed. From a street vendor, they purchased olives after tasting several varieties and choosing their favorites. At a pasta store they selected interestingly shaped noodles and asked the woman running the store the proper amount for thirteen people—the ten people Count Olaf mentioned, and the three of them. Then, at the supermarket, they purchased garlic, which is a sharp-tasting bulbous plant; anchovies, which are small salty fish; capers, which are flower buds of a small shrub and taste marvelous; and tomatoes, which are actually fruits and not vegetables as most people believe. They thought it would be proper to serve dessert, and bought several envelopes of pudding mix. Perhaps, the orphans thought, if they made a delicious meal, Count Olaf might be a bit kinder to them.

“Thank you so much for helping us out today,” Violet said, as she and her siblings walked home with Justice Strauss. “I don’t know what we would have done without you.”

“You seem like very intelligent people,” Justice Strauss said. “I daresay you would have thought of something. But it continues to strike me as odd that Count Olaf has asked you to prepare such an enormous meal. Well, here we are. I must go inside and put my own groceries away. I hope you children will come over soon and borrow books from my library.”

“Tomorrow?” Klaus said quickly. “Could we come over tomorrow?”

“I don’t see why not,” Justice Strauss said, smiling.

“I can’t tell you how much we appreciate this,” Violet said, carefully. With their kind parents dead and Count Olaf treating them so abominably, the three children were not used to kindness from adults, and weren’t sure if they were expected to do anything back. “Tomorrow, before we use your library again, Klaus and I would be more than happy to do household chores for you. Sunny isn’t really old enough to work, but I’m sure we could find some way she could help you.”

Justice Strauss smiled at the three children, but her eyes were sad. She reached out a hand and put it on Violet’s hair, and Violet felt more comforted than she had in some time. “That won’t be necessary,” Justice Strauss said. “You are always welcome in my home.” Then she turned and went into her home, and after a moment of staring after her, the Baudelaire orphans went into theirs.

For most of the afternoon, Violet, Klaus, and Sunny cooked the puttanesca sauce according to the recipe. Violet roasted the garlic and washed and chopped the anchovies. Klaus peeled the tomatoes and pitted the olives. Sunny banged on a pot with a wooden spoon, singing a rather repetitive song she had written herself. And all three of the children felt less miserable than they had since their arrival at Count Olaf’s. The smell of cooking food is often a calming one, and the kitchen grew cozy as the sauce simmered, a culinary term which means “cooked over low heat.” The three orphans spoke of pleasant memories of their parents and about Justice

Strauss, who they agreed was a wonderful neighbor and in whose library they planned to spend a great deal of time. As they talked, they mixed and tasted the chocolate pudding.

Just as they were placing the pudding in the refrigerator to cool, Violet, Klaus, and Sunny heard a loud, booming sound as the front door was flung open, and I'm sure I don't have to tell you who was home.

"Orphans?" Count Olaf called out in his scratchy voice. "Where are you, orphans?"

"In the kitchen, Count Olaf," Klaus called. "We're just finishing dinner."

"You'd better be," Count Olaf said, and strode into the kitchen. He gazed at all three Baudelaire children with his shiny, shiny eyes. "My troupe is right behind me and they are very hungry. Where is the roast beef?"

"We didn't make roast beef," Violet said. "We made puttanesca sauce."

"What?" Count Olaf asked. "No roast beef?"

"You didn't tell us you wanted roast beef," Klaus said.

Count Olaf slid toward the children so that he looked even taller than he was. His eyes grew even brighter, and his one eyebrow raised in anger. "In agreeing to adopt you," he said, "I have become your father, and as your father I am not someone to be trifled with. I demand that you serve roast beef to myself and my guests."

"We don't have any!" Violet cried. "We made puttanesca sauce!"

"*No! No! No*!" Sunny shouted.

Count Olaf looked down at Sunny, who had spoken so suddenly. With an inhuman roar he picked her up in one scraggly hand and raised her so she was staring at him in the eye. Needless to say, Sunny was very frightened and began crying immediately, too scared to even try to bite the hand that held her.

“Put her down immediately, you beast!” Klaus shouted. He jumped up, trying to rescue Sunny from the grasp of the Count, but he was holding her too high to reach. Count Olaf looked down at Klaus and smiled a terrible, toothy grin, raising the wailing Sunny up even higher in the air. He seemed about to drop her to the floor when there was a large burst of laughter in the next room.

“Olaf! Where’s Olaf?” voices called out. Count Olaf paused, still holding the wailing Sunny up in the air, as members of his theater troupe walked into the kitchen. Soon they were crowding the room—an assortment of strange-looking characters of all shapes and sizes. There was a bald man with a very long nose, dressed in a long black robe. There were two women who had bright white powder all over their faces, making them look like ghosts. Behind the women was a man with very long and skinny arms, at the end of which were two hooks instead of hands. There was a person who was extremely fat, and who looked like neither a man nor a woman. And behind this person, standing in the doorway, were an assortment of people the children could not see but who promised to be just as frightening.

“Here you are, Olaf,” said one of the white-faced women. “What in the world are you doing?”

“I’m just disciplining these orphans,” Count Olaf said. “I asked them to make dinner, and all they have made is some disgusting sauce.”

“You can’t go easy on children,” the man with the hook-hands said. “They must be taught to obey their elders.”

The tall, bald man peered at the youngsters. “Are these,” he said to Count Olaf, “those wealthy children you were telling me about?”

“Yes,” Count Olaf said. “They are so awful I can scarcely stand to touch them.” With that, he lowered Sunny, who was still wailing, to the floor. Violet and Klaus breathed a sigh of relief that he had not dropped her from that great height.

“I don’t blame you,” said someone in the doorway.

Count Olaf rubbed his hands together as if he had been holding something revolting instead of an infant. “Well, enough talk,” he said. “I suppose we will eat their dinner, even though it is all wrong. Everyone, follow me to the dining room and I will pour us some wine. Perhaps by the time these brats serve us, we will be too drunk to care if it is roast beef or not.”

“Hurrah!” cried several members of the troupe, and they marched through the kitchen, following Count Olaf into the dining room. Nobody paid a bit of attention to the children, except for the bald man, who stopped and stared Violet in the eye.

“You’re a pretty one,” he said, taking her face in his rough hands. “If I were you I would try not to anger Count Olaf, or he might wreck that pretty little face of yours.” Violet shuddered, and the bald man gave a high-pitched giggle and left the room.

The Baudelaire children, alone in the kitchen, found themselves breathing heavily, as if they had just run a long distance. Sunny continued to wail, and Klaus found that his eyes were wet with tears as well. Only Violet didn’t cry, but merely trembled with fear and revulsion, a word which here means “an unpleasant mixture of horror and disgust.” For several moments none of them could speak.

“This is terrible, terrible,” Klaus said finally. “Violet, what can we do?”

“I don’t know,” she said. “I’m afraid.”

“Me too,” Klaus said.

“Hux!” Sunny said, as she stopped crying.

“Let’s have some dinner!” someone shouted from the dining room, and the theater troupe began pounding on the table in strict rhythm, which is an exceedingly rude thing to do.

“We’d better serve the puttanesca,” Klaus said, “or who knows what Count Olaf will do to us.”

Violet thought of what the bald man had said, about wrecking her face, and nodded. The two of them looked at the pot of bubbling sauce, which had seemed so cozy while they were making it and now looked like a vat of blood. Then, leaving Sunny behind in the kitchen, they walked into the dining room, Klaus carrying a bowl of the interestingly shaped noodles and Violet carrying the pot of puttanesca sauce and a large ladle with which to serve it. The theater troupe was talking and cackling, drinking again and again from their wine cups and paying no attention to the Baudelaire orphans as they circled the table serving everyone dinner. Violet’s right hand ached from holding the heavy ladle. She thought of switching to her left hand, but because she was right-handed she was afraid she might spill the sauce with her left hand, which could enrage Count Olaf again. She stared miserably at Olaf’s plate of food and found herself wishing she had bought poison at the market and put it in the puttanesca sauce. Finally, they were through serving, and Klaus and Violet slipped back into the kitchen. They listened to the wild, rough laughter of Count Olaf and his theater troupe, and they picked at their own portions of food, too miserable to eat. Before long, Olaf’s friends were pounding on the table in strict rhythm again, and the orphans went out to the dining room to clear the table, and then again to serve the chocolate pudding. By now it was obvious that Count Olaf and his associates had drunk a great deal of wine, and they slouched at the table and spoke much less. Finally, they roused themselves, and trooped back through the kitchen, scarcely glancing at the children on their way out of the house. Count Olaf looked around the room, which was filled with dirty dishes.

“Because you haven’t cleaned up yet,” he said to the orphans, “I suppose you can be excused from attending tonight’s performance. But after cleaning up, you are to go straight to your beds.”

Klaus had been glaring at the floor, trying to hide how upset he was. But at this he could not remain silent. “You mean our *bed*!” he shouted. “You have only provided us with one bed!”

Members of the theater troupe stopped in their tracks at this outburst, and glanced from Klaus to Count Olaf to see what would happen next. Count Olaf raised his one eyebrow, and his eyes shone bright, but he spoke calmly.

“If you would like another bed,” he said, “tomorrow you may go into town and purchase one.”

“You know perfectly well we haven’t any money,” Klaus said.

“Of course you do,” Count Olaf said, and his voice began to get a little louder. “You are the inheritors of an enormous fortune.”

“That money,” Klaus said, remembering what Mr. Poe said, “is not to be used until Violet is of age.”

Count Olaf’s face grew very red. For a moment he said nothing. Then, in one sudden movement, he reached down and struck Klaus across the face. Klaus fell to the floor, his face inches from the eye tattooed on Olaf’s ankle. His glasses leaped from his face and skittered into a corner. His left cheek, where Olaf had struck him, felt as if it were on fire. The theater troupe laughed, and a few of them applauded as if Count Olaf had done something very brave instead of something despicable.

“Come on, friends,” Count Olaf said to his comrades. “We’ll be late for our own performance.”

“If I know you, Olaf,” said the man with the hook-hands, “you’ll figure out a way to get at that Baudelaire money.”

“We’ll see,” Count Olaf said, but his eyes were shining bright as if he already had an idea. There was another loud boom as the front door shut behind Count Olaf and his terrible friends, and the Baudelaire children were alone in the kitchen. Violet knelt at Klaus’s side, giving him a hug to try to make him feel better. Sunny crawled over to his glasses, picked them up, and brought them to him. Klaus began to sob, not so much from the pain but from rage at the terrible situation they were in. Violet and Sunny cried with him, and they continued weeping as they washed the dishes, and as they blew out the candles in the dining room, and as they changed out of their clothes and lay down to go to sleep, Klaus in the bed, Violet on the floor, Sunny on her little cushion of curtains. The moonlight shone through the window, and if anyone had looked into the Baudelaire orphans' bedroom, they would have seen three children crying quietly all night long.

CHAPTER
Five

Unless you have been very, very lucky, you have undoubtedly experienced events in your life that have made you cry. So unless you have been very, very lucky, you know that a good, long session of weeping can often make you feel better, even if your circumstances have not changed one bit. So it was with the Baudelaire orphans. Having cried all night, they rose the next morning feeling as if a weight were off their shoulders. The three children knew, of course, that they were still in a terrible situation, but they thought they might do something to make it better.

The morning's note from Count Olaf ordered them to chop firewood in the backyard, and as Violet and Klaus swung the axe down over each log to break it into smaller pieces, they discussed possible plans of action, while Sunny chewed meditatively on a small piece of wood.

"Clearly," Klaus said, fingering the ugly bruise on his face where Olaf had struck him, "we cannot stay here any longer. I would rather take my chances on the streets than live in this terrible place."

"But who knows what misfortunes would befall us on the streets?" Violet pointed out. "At least here we have a roof over our heads."

"I wish our parents' money *could* be used now, instead of when you come of age," Klaus said. "Then we could buy a castle and live in it, with armed guards patrolling the outside to keep out Count Olaf and his troupe."

"And I could have a large inventing studio," Violet said wistfully. She swung the axe down and split a log neatly in two. "Filled with gears and pulleys and wires and an elaborate computer system."

"And I could have a large library," Klaus said, "as comfortable as Justice Strauss's, but more enormous."

"Gibbo!" Sunny shrieked, which appeared to mean "And I could have lots of things to bite."

"But in the meantime," Violet said, "we have to do something about our predicament."

"Perhaps Justice Strauss could adopt us," Klaus said. "She said we were always welcome in her home."

"But she meant for a visit, or to use her library," Violet pointed out. "She didn't mean to *live*."

"Perhaps if we explained our situation to her, she would agree to adopt us," Klaus said hopefully, but when Violet looked at him she saw that he knew it was of no use. Adoption is an enormous decision, and not likely to happen impulsively. I'm sure you, in your life, have occasionally wished to be raised by different people than the ones who are raising you, but knew in your heart that the chances of this were very slim.

"I think we should go see Mr. Poe," Violet said. "He told us when he dropped us here that we could contact him at the bank if we had any questions."

"We don't really have a question," Klaus said. "We have a complaint." He was thinking of Mr. Poe walking toward them at Briny Beach, with his terrible message. Even though the fire was of course not Mr. Poe's fault, Klaus was reluctant to see Mr. Poe because he was afraid of getting more bad news.

"I can't think of anyone else to contact," Violet said. "Mr. Poe is in charge of our affairs, and I'm sure if he knew how horrid Count Olaf is, he would take us right out of here."

Klaus pictured Mr. Poe arriving in his car and putting the Baudelaire orphans inside, to go somewhere else, and felt a stirring of hope. Anywhere would be better than here. "Okay," he said. "Let's get this firewood all chopped and we'll go to the bank."

Invigorated by their plan, the Baudelaire orphans swung their axes at an amazing speed, and soon enough they were done chopping firewood and ready to go to the bank. They remembered Count Olaf saying he had a map of the city, and they looked thoroughly for it, but they couldn't find any trace of a map, and decided it must be in the tower, where they were forbidden to go. So, without directions of any sort, the Baudelaire children set off for the city's banking district in hopes of finding Mr. Poe.

After walking through the meat district, the flower district, and the sculpture district, the three children arrived at the banking district, pausing to take a refreshing sip of water at the Fountain of Victorious Finance. The banking district consisted of several wide streets with large marble buildings on each side of them, all banks. They went first to Trustworthy Bank, and then to Faithful Savings and Loan, and then to Subservient Financial Services, each time inquiring for Mr. Poe. Finally, a receptionist at Subservient said she knew that Mr. Poe worked down the street, at Mulctuary Money Management. The building was square and rather plain-looking, though once inside, the three orphans were intimidated by the hustle and bustle of the people as they raced around the large, echoey room. Finally, they asked a uniformed guard whether they had arrived at the right place to speak to Mr. Poe, and he led them into a large office with many file cabinets and no windows.

“Why, hello,” said Mr. Poe, in a puzzled tone of voice. He was sitting at a desk covered in typed papers that looked important and boring. Surrounding a small framed photograph of his wife and his two beastly sons were three telephones with flashing lights. “Please come in.”

“Thank you,” said Klaus, shaking Mr. Poe’s hand. The Baudelaire youngsters sat down in three large and comfortable chairs.

Mr. Poe opened his mouth to speak, but had to cough into a handkerchief before he could begin. “I’m very busy today,” he said, finally. “So I don’t have too much time to chat. Next time you should call ahead of time when you plan on being in the neighborhood, and I will put some time aside to take you to lunch.”

“That would be very pleasant,” Violet said, “and we’re sorry we didn’t contact you before we stopped by, but we find ourselves in an urgent situation.”

“Count Olaf is a madman,” Klaus said, getting right to the point. “We cannot stay with him.”

“He struck Klaus across the face. See his bruise?” Violet said, but just as she said it, one of the telephones rang, in a loud, unpleasant wail. “Excuse me,” Mr. Poe said, and picked up the phone. “Poe here,” he said into the receiver. “What? Yes. Yes. Yes. Yes. No. Yes. Thank you.” He hung up the phone and looked at the Baudelaires as if he had forgotten they were there.

“I’m sorry,” Mr. Poe said, “what were we talking about? Oh, yes, Count Olaf. I’m sorry you don’t have a good first impression of him.”

“He has only provided us with one bed,” Klaus said.

“He makes us do a great many difficult chores.”

“He drinks too much wine.”

“Excuse me,” Mr. Poe said, as another telephone rang. “Poe here,” he said. “Seven. Seven. Seven. Seven. Six and a half. Seven. You’re welcome.” He hung up and quickly wrote something down on one of his papers, then looked at the children. “I’m sorry,” he said, “what were you saying about Count Olaf? Making you do chores doesn’t sound too bad.”

“He calls us orphans.”

“He has terrible friends.”

“He is always asking about our money.”

“Poko!” (This was from Sunny.)

Mr. Poe put up his hands to indicate he had heard enough. “Children, children,” he said. “You must give yourselves time to adjust to your new home. You’ve only been there a few days.”

“We have been there long enough to know Count Olaf is a bad man,” Klaus said.

Mr. Poe sighed, and looked at each of the three children. His face was kind, but it didn’t look like he really believed what the Baudelaire orphans were saying. “Are you familiar with the Latin term ‘in loco parentis’?” he asked.

Violet and Sunny looked at Klaus. The biggest reader of the three, he was the most likely to know vocabulary words and foreign phrases. “Something about trains?” he asked. Maybe Mr. Poe was going to take them by train to another relative.

Mr. Poe shook his head. “‘In loco parentis’ means ‘acting in the role of parent,’” he said. “It is a legal term and it applies to Count Olaf. Now that you are in his care, the Count may raise you using any methods he sees fit. I'm sorry if your parents did not make you do any household chores, or if you never saw them drink any wine, or if you like their friends better than Count Olaf's friends, but these are things that you must get used to, as Count Olaf is acting in loco parentis. Understand?"

"But he *struck* my brother!" Violet said. "Look at his face!"

As Violet spoke, Mr. Poe reached into his pocket for his handkerchief and, covering his mouth, coughed many, many times into it. He coughed so loudly that Violet could not be certain he had heard her.

"Whatever Count Olaf has done," Mr. Poe said, glancing down at one of his papers and circling a number, "he has acted in loco parentis, and there's nothing I can do about it. Your money will be well protected by myself and by the bank, but Count Olaf's parenting techniques are his own business. Now, I hate to usher you out posthaste, but I have very much work to do."

The children just sat there, stunned. Mr. Poe looked up, and cleared his throat. "'Posthaste,'" he said, "means—"

"—means you'll do nothing to help us," Violet finished for him. She was shaking with anger and frustration. As one of the phones began ringing, she stood up and walked out of the room, followed by Klaus, who was carrying Sunny. They stalked out of the bank and stood on the street, not knowing what to do next.

"What shall we do next?" Klaus asked sadly.

Violet stared up at the sky. She wished she could invent something that could take them out of there. "It's getting a bit late," she said. "We might as well just go back and think of something else tomorrow. Perhaps we can stop and see Justice Strauss."

"But you said she wouldn't help us," Klaus said.

"Not for help," Violet said, "for books."

It is very useful, when one is young, to learn the difference between "literally" and "figuratively." If something happens literally, it actually happens; if something happens figuratively, it *feels like* it's happening. If you are literally jumping for joy, for instance, it means you are leaping in the air because you are very happy. If you are figuratively jumping for joy, it means you are so happy that you *could* jump for joy, but are saving your energy for other matters. The Baudelaire orphans walked back to Count Olaf's neighborhood and stopped at the home of Justice Strauss, who welcomed them inside and let them choose books from the library. Violet chose several about mechanical inventions, Klaus chose several about wolves, and Sunny found a book with many pictures of teeth inside. They then went to their room and crowded together on the one bed, reading intently and happily. *Figuratively*, they escaped from Count Olaf and their miserable existence. They did not *literally* escape, because they were still in his house and vulnerable to Olaf's evil in loco parentis ways. But by immersing themselves in their favorite reading topics, they felt far away from their predicament, as if they had escaped. In the situation of the orphans, figuratively escaping was not enough, of course, but at the end of a tiring and hopeless day, it would have to do. Violet, Klaus, and Sunny read their books and, in the back of their minds, hoped that soon their figurative escape would eventually turn into a literal one.

CHAPTER
Six

The next morning, when the children stumbled sleepily from their bedroom into the kitchen, rather than a note from Count Olaf they found Count Olaf himself.

“Good morning, orphans,” he said. “I have your oatmeal all ready in bowls for you.”

The children took seats at the kitchen table and stared nervously into their oatmeal. If you knew Count Olaf, and he suddenly served you a meal, wouldn’t you be afraid there was something terrible in it, like poison or ground glass? But instead, Violet, Klaus, and Sunny found that fresh raspberries had been sprinkled on top of each of their portions. The Baudelaire orphans hadn’t had raspberries since their parents died, although they were extremely fond of them.

“Thank you,” Klaus said, carefully, picking up one of the raspberries and examining it. Perhaps these were poison berries that just looked like delicious ones. Count Olaf, seeing how suspiciously Klaus was looking at the berries, smiled and plucked a berry out of Sunny's bowl. Looking at each of the three youngsters, he popped it into his mouth and ate it.

"Aren't raspberries delicious?" he asked. "They were my favorite berries when I was your age."

Violet tried to picture Count Olaf as a youngster, but couldn't. His shiny eyes, bony hands, and shadowy smile all seemed to be things only adults possess. Despite her fear of him, however, she took her spoon in her right hand and began to eat her oatmeal. Count Olaf had eaten some, so it probably wasn't poisonous, and anyway she was very hungry. Klaus began to eat, too, as did Sunny, who got oatmeal and raspberries all over her face.

"I received a phone call yesterday," Count Olaf said, "from Mr. Poe. He told me you children had been to see him."

The children exchanged glances. They had hoped their visit would be taken in confidence, a phrase which here means "kept a secret between Mr. Poe and themselves and not blabbed to Count Olaf."

"Mr. Poe told me," Count Olaf said, "that you appeared to be having some difficulty adjusting to the life I have so graciously provided for you. I'm very sorry to hear that."

The children looked at Count Olaf. His face was very serious, as if he *were* very sorry to hear that, but his eyes were shiny and bright, the way they are when someone is telling a joke.

"Is that so?" Violet said. "I'm sorry Mr. Poe bothered you."

"I'm glad he did," Count Olaf said, "because I want the three of you to feel at home here, now that I am your father."

The children shuddered a little at that, remembering their own kind father and gazing sadly at the poor substitute now sitting across the table from them.

"Lately," Count Olaf said, "I have been very nervous about my performances with the theater troupe, and I'm afraid I may have acted a bit standoffish."

The word "standoffish" is a wonderful one, but it does not describe Count Olaf's behavior toward the children. It means "reluctant to associate with others," and it might describe somebody who, during a party, would stand in a corner and not talk to anyone. It would *not* describe somebody who provides one bed for three people to sleep in, forces them to do horrible chores, and strikes them across the face. There are many words for people like that, but "standoffish" is not one of them. Klaus knew the word "standoffish" and almost laughed out loud at Olaf's incorrect use of it. But his face still had a bruise on it, so Klaus remained silent.

"Therefore, to make you feel a little more at home here, I would like to have you participate in my next play. Perhaps if you took part in the work I do, you would be less likely to run off complaining to Mr. Poe."

"In what way would we participate?" Violet asked. She was thinking of all the chores they already did for Count Olaf, and was not in the mood to do more.

"Well," Count Olaf said, his eyes shining brightly, "the play is called *The Marvelous Marriage*, and it is written by the great playwright Al Funcoot. We will give only one performance, on this Friday night. It is about a man who is very brave and intelligent, played by me. In the finale, he marries the young, beautiful woman he loves, in front of a crowd of cheering people. *You*, Klaus, and *you*, Sunny, will play some of the cheering people in the crowd."

"But we're shorter than most adults," Klaus said. "Won't that look strange to the audience?"

"You will be playing two midgets who attend the wedding," Olaf said patiently.

"And what will I do?" Violet asked. "I am very handy with tools, so perhaps I could help you build the set."

“Build the set? Heavens, no,” Count Olaf said. “A pretty girl like you shouldn’t be working backstage.”

“But I’d *like* to,” Violet said.

Count Olaf’s one eyebrow raised slightly, and the Baudelaire orphans recognized this sign of his anger. But then the eyebrow went down again as he forced himself to remain calm. “But I have such an important role for you onstage,” he said. “You are going to play the young woman I marry.”

Violet felt her oatmeal and raspberries shift around in her stomach as if she had just caught the flu. It was bad enough having Count Olaf acting in loco parentis and announcing himself as their father, but to consider this man her husband, even for the purposes of a play, was even more dreadful.

“It’s a *very* important role,” he continued, his mouth curling up into an unconvincing smile, “although you have no lines other than ‘I do,’ which you will say when Justice Strauss asks you if you will have me.”

“Justice Strauss?” Violet said. “What does she have to do with it?”

“She has agreed to play the part of the judge,” Count Olaf said. Behind him, one of the eyes painted on the kitchen walls closely watched over each of the Baudelaire children. “I asked Justice Strauss to participate because I wanted to be neighborly, as well as fatherly.”

“Count Olaf,” Violet said, and then stopped herself. She wanted to argue her way out of playing his bride, but she didn’t want to make him angry. “*Father*,” she said, “I’m not sure I’m talented enough to perform professionally. I would hate to disgrace your good name and the name of Al Funcoot. Plus I’ll be very busy in the next few weeks working on my inventions—and learning how to prepare roast beef,” she added quickly, remembering how he had behaved about dinner.

Count Olaf reached out one of his spidery hands and stroked Violet on the chin, looking deep into her eyes. “*You will*,” he said, “participate in this theatrical performance. I would prefer it if you would participate voluntarily, but as I believe Mr. Poe explained to you, I can order you to participate and *you must obey*." Olaf's sharp and dirty fingernails gently scratched on Violet's chin, and she shivered. The room was very, very quiet as Olaf finally let go, and stood up and left without a word. The Baudelaire children listened to his heavy footsteps go up the stairs to the tower they were forbidden to enter.

"Well," Klaus said hesitantly, "I guess it won't hurt to be in the play. It seems to be very important to him, and we want to keep on his good side."

"But he must be up to something," Violet said.

"You don't think those berries were poisoned, do you?" Klaus asked worriedly.

"No," Violet said. "Olaf is after the fortune we will inherit. Killing us would do him no good."

"But what good does it do him to have us be in his stupid play?"

"I don't know," Violet admitted miserably. She stood up and started washing out the oatmeal bowls.

"I wish we knew something more about inheritance law," Klaus said. "I'll bet Count Olaf has cooked up some plan to get our money, but I don't know what it could be."

"I guess we could ask Mr. Poe about it," Violet said doubtfully, as Klaus stood beside her and dried the dishes. "He knows all those Latin legal phrases."

"But Mr. Poe would probably call Count Olaf again, and then he'd know we were on to him," Klaus pointed out. "Maybe we should try to talk to Justice Strauss. She's a judge, so she must know all about the law."

"But she's also Olaf's neighbor," Violet replied, "and she might tell him that we had asked."

Klaus took his glasses off, which he often did when he was thinking hard. "How could we find out about the law without Olaf's knowledge?"

“Book!” Sunny shouted suddenly. She probably meant something like “Would somebody please wipe my face?” but it made Violet and Klaus look at each other. *Book*. They were both thinking the same thing: Surely Justice Strauss would have a book on inheritance law.

“Count Olaf didn’t leave us any chores to do,” Violet said, “so I suppose we are free to visit Justice Strauss and her library.”

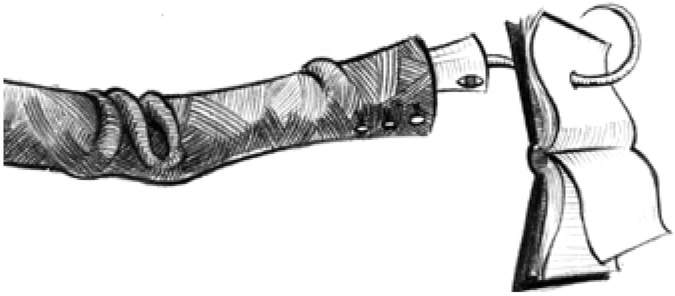
Klaus smiled. “Yes indeed,” he said. “And you know, today I don’t think I’ll choose a book on wolves.”

“Nor I,” Violet said, “on mechanical engineering. I think I’d like to read about inheritance law.”

“Well, let’s go,” Klaus said. “Justice Strauss said we could come over soon, and we don’t want to be *standoffish*.”

At the mention of the word that Count Olaf had used so ridiculously, the Baudelaire orphans all laughed, even Sunny, who of course did not have a very big vocabulary. Swiftly they put away the clean oatmeal bowls in the kitchen cupboards, which watched them with painted eyes. Then the three young people ran next door. Friday, the day of the performance, was only a few days off, and the children wanted to figure out Count Olaf’s plan as quickly as possible.

CHAPTER
Seven



There are many, many types of books in the world, which makes good sense, because there are many, many types of people, and everybody wants to read something different. For instance, people who hate stories in which terrible things happen to small children should put this book down immediately. But one type of book that practically no one likes to read is a book about the law. Books about the law are notorious for being very long, very dull, and very difficult to read. This is one reason many lawyers make heaps of money. The money is an incentive—the word "incentive" here means "an offered reward to persuade you to do something you don't want to do"—to read long, dull, and difficult books.

The Baudelaire children had a slightly different incentive for reading these books, of course. Their incentive was not heaps of money, but preventing Count Olaf from doing something horrible to them in order to get heaps of money. But even with this incentive, getting through the law books in Justice Strauss's private library was a very, very, very hard task.

"Goodness," Justice Strauss said, when she came into the library and saw what they were reading. She had let them in the house but immediately went into the backyard to do her gardening, leaving the Baudelaire orphans alone in her glorious library. “I thought you were interested in mechanical engineering, animals of North America, and teeth. Are you sure you want to read those enormous law books? Even *I* don’t like reading them, and I work in law.”

“Yes,” Violet lied, “I find them very interesting, Justice Strauss.”

“So do I,” Klaus said. “Violet and I are considering a career in law, so we are fascinated by these books.”

“Well,” Justice Strauss said, “Sunny can’t possibly be interested. Maybe she’d like to come help me with the gardening.”

“Wipi!” Sunny shrieked, which meant “I’d much prefer gardening to sitting around watching my siblings struggle through law books.”

“Well, make sure she doesn’t eat any dirt,” Klaus said, bringing Sunny over to the judge.

“Of course,” said Justice Strauss. “We wouldn’t want her to be sick for the big performance.”

Violet and Klaus exchanged a look. “Are you excited about the play?” Violet asked hesitantly.

Justice Strauss’s face lit up. “Oh yes,” she said. “I’ve always wanted to perform onstage, ever since I was a little girl. And now Count Olaf has given me the opportunity to live my lifelong dream. Aren’t you thrilled to be a part of the theater?”

“I guess so,” Violet said.

“Of course you are,” Judge Strauss said, stars in her eyes and Sunny in her hands. She left the library and Klaus and Violet looked at each other and sighed.

“She’s stagestruck,” Klaus said. “She won’t believe that Count Olaf is up to something, no matter what.”

“She wouldn’t help us anyway,” Violet pointed out glumly. “She’s a judge, and she’d just start babbling about in loco parentis like Mr. Poe.”

“That’s why we’ve got to find a legal reason to stop the performance,” Klaus said firmly. “Have you found anything in your book yet?”

“Nothing helpful,” Violet said, glancing down at a piece of scrap paper on which she had been taking notes. “Fifty years ago there was a woman who left an enormous sum of money to her pet weasel, and none to her three sons. The three sons tried to prove that the woman was insane so the money would go to them.”

“What happened?” Klaus asked.

“I think the weasel died,” Violet replied, “but I’m not sure. I have to look up some of the words.”

“I don’t think it’s going to help us anyway,” Klaus said.

“Maybe Count Olaf is trying to prove that *we’re* insane, so he’d get the money,” Violet said.

“But why would making us be in *The Marvelous Marriage* prove we were insane?” Klaus asked.

“I don’t know,” Violet admitted. “I’m stuck. Have you found anything?”

“Around the time of your weasel lady,” Klaus said, flipping through the enormous book he had been reading, “a group of actors put on a production of Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*, and none of them wore any clothing.”

Violet blushed. “You mean they were all naked, onstage?”

“Only briefly,” Klaus said, smiling. “The police came and shut down the production. I don’t think that’s very helpful, either. It was just pretty interesting to read about.”

Violet sighed. “Maybe Count Olaf isn’t up to anything,” she said. “I’m not interested in performing in his play, but perhaps we’re all worked up about nothing. Maybe Count Olaf really *is* just trying to welcome us into the family."

"How can you say that?" Klaus cried. "He struck me across the face."

"But there's no way he can get hold of our fortune just by putting us in a play," Violet said. "My eyes are tired from reading these books, Klaus, and they aren't helping us. I'm going to go out and help Justice Strauss in the garden."

Klaus watched his sister leave the library and felt a wave of hopelessness wash over him. The day of the performance was not far off, and he hadn't even figured out what Count Olaf was up to, let alone how to stop him. All his life, Klaus had believed that if you read enough books you could solve any problem, but now he wasn't so sure.

"You there!" A voice coming from the doorway startled Klaus out of his thoughts. "Count Olaf sent me to look for you. You are to return to the house immediately."

Klaus turned and saw one of the members of Count Olaf's theater troupe, the one with hooks for hands, standing in the doorway. "What are you doing in this musty old room, anyway?" he asked in his croak of a voice, walking over to where Klaus was sitting. Narrowing his beady eyes, he read the title of one of the books. "*Inheritance Law and Its Implications*?" he said sharply. "Why are you reading that?"

"Why do you think I'm reading it?" Klaus said.

"I'll tell you what I think." The man put one of his terrible hooks on Klaus's shoulder. "I think you should never be allowed inside this library again, at least until Friday. We don't want a little boy getting big ideas. Now, where is your sister and that hideous baby?"

"In the garden," Klaus said, shrugging the hook off of his shoulder. "Why don't you go and get them?"

The man leaned over until his face was just inches from Klaus's, so close that the man's features flickered into a blur. "Listen to me very carefully, little boy," he said, breathing out foul steam with every word. "The only reason Count Olaf hasn't torn you limb from limb is that he hasn't gotten hold of your money. He allows you to live while he works out his plans. But ask yourself this, you little bookworm: What reason will he have to keep you alive after he has your money? What do you think will happen to you then?"

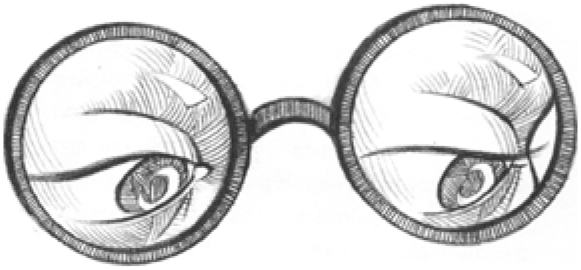
Klaus felt an icy chill go through him as the horrible man spoke. He had never been so terrified in all his life. He found that his arms and legs were shaking uncontrollably, as if he were having some sort of fit. His mouth was making strange sounds, like Sunny always did, as he struggled to find something to say. "Ah—" Klaus heard himself choke out. "Ah—"

"When the time comes," the hook-handed man said smoothly, ignoring Klaus's noises, "I believe Count Olaf just might leave you to me. So if I were you, I'd start acting a little nicer." The man stood up again and put both his hooks in front of Klaus's face, letting the light from the reading lamps reflect off the wicked-looking devices. "Now, if you will excuse me, I have to fetch your poor orphan siblings."

Klaus felt his body go limp as the hook-handed man left the room, and he wanted to sit there for a moment and catch his breath. But his mind wouldn't let him. This was his last moment in the library, and perhaps his last opportunity to foil Count Olaf's plan. But what to do? Hearing the faint sounds of the hook-handed man talking to Justice Strauss in the garden, Klaus looked frantically around the library for something that could be helpful. Then, just as he heard the man's footsteps heading back his way, Klaus spied one book, and quickly grabbed it. He untucked his shirt and put the book inside, hastily retucking it just as the hook-handed man reentered the library, escorting Violet and carrying Sunny, who was trying without success to bite the man's hooks.

"I'm ready to go," Klaus said quickly, and walked out the door before the man could get a good look at him. He walked quickly ahead of his siblings, hoping that nobody would notice the book-shaped lump in his shirt. Maybe, just maybe, the book Klaus was smuggling could save their lives.

CHAPTER
Eight



Klaus stayed up all night reading, which was normally something he loved to do. Back when his parents were alive, Klaus used to take a flashlight to bed with him and hide under the covers, reading until he couldn't keep his eyes open. Some mornings, his father would come into Klaus's room to wake him up and find him asleep, still clutching his flashlight in one hand and his book in the other. But on this particular night, of course, the circumstances were much different.

Klaus stood by the window, squinting as he read his smuggled book by the moonlight that trickled into the room. He occasionally glanced at his sisters. Violet was sleeping fitfully—a word which here means "with much tossing and turning"—on the lumpy bed, and Sunny had wormed her way into the pile of curtains so that she just looked like a small heap of cloth. Klaus had not told his siblings about the book, because he didn't want to give them false hope. He wasn't sure the book would help them out of their dilemma.

The book was long, and difficult to read, and Klaus became more and more tired as the night wore on. Occasionally his eyes would close. He found himself reading the same sentence over and over. He found himself reading the same sentence over and over. He found himself reading the same sentence over and over. But then he would remember the way the hook-hands of Count Olaf's associate had glinted in the library, and would imagine them tearing into his flesh, and he would wake right up and continue reading. He found a small scrap of paper and tore it into strips, which he used to mark significant parts of the book.

By the time the light outside grew gray with the approaching dawn, Klaus had found out all he needed to know. His hopes rose along with the sun. Finally, when the first few birds began to sing, Klaus tiptoed to the door of the bedroom and eased it open quietly, careful not to wake the restless Violet or Sunny, who was still hidden in the pile of curtains. Then he went to the kitchen and sat and waited for Count Olaf.

He didn't have to wait long before he heard Olaf tromping down the tower stairs. When Count Olaf walked into the kitchen, he saw Klaus sitting at the table and smirked, a word which here means "smiled in an unfriendly, phony way."

"Hello, orphan," he said. "You're up early."

Klaus's heart was beating fast, but he felt calm on the outside, as if he had on a layer of invisible armor. "I've been up all night," he said, "reading this book." He put the book out on the table so Olaf could see it. "It's called *Nuptial Law*," Klaus said, "and I learned many interesting things while reading it."

Count Olaf had taken out a bottle of wine to pour himself some breakfast, but when he saw the book he stopped, and sat down.

"The word 'nuptial,'" Klaus said, "means 'relating to marriage.'"

"I *know* what the word means," Count Olaf growled. "Where did you get that book?"

"From Justice Strauss's library," Klaus said. "But that's not important. What's important is that I have found out your plan."

“Is that so?” Count Olaf said, his one eyebrow raising. “And what is my plan, you little runt?”

Klaus ignored the insult and opened the book to where one of the scraps of paper was marking his place. “‘The laws of marriage in this community are very simple,’” he read out loud. “‘The requirements are as follows: the presence of a judge, a statement of “I do” by both the bride and the groom, and the signing of an explanatory document in the bride’s own hand.’” Klaus put down the book and pointed at Count Olaf. “If my sister says ‘I do’ and signs a piece of paper, while Justice Strauss is in the room, then she is legally married. This play you’re putting on shouldn’t be called *The Marvelous Marriage*. It should be called *The Menacing Marriage*. You’re not going to marry Violet figuratively—you’re going to marry her literally! This play won’t be pretend; it will be real and legally binding.”

Count Olaf laughed a rough, hoarse laugh. “Your sister isn’t old enough to get married.”

“She can get married if she has the permission of her legal guardian, acting in loco parentis,” Klaus said. “I read that, too. You can’t fool me.”

“Why in the world would I want to actually marry your sister?” Count Olaf asked. “It is true she is very pretty, but a man like myself can acquire any number of beautiful women.”

Klaus turned to a different section of *Nuptial Law*. “‘A legal husband,’” he read out loud, “‘has the right to control any money in the possession of his legal wife.’” Klaus gazed at Count Olaf in triumph. “You’re going to marry my sister to gain control of the Baudelaire fortune! Or at least, that’s what you *planned* to do. But when I show this information to Mr. Poe, your play will *not* be performed, and you will go to jail!”

Count Olaf’s eyes grew very shiny, but he continued to smirk at Klaus. This was surprising. Klaus had guessed that once he announced what he knew, this dreadful man would have been very angry, even violent. After all, he’d had a furious outburst just because he’d wanted roast beef instead of puttanesca sauce. Surely he’d be even more enraged to have his plan discovered. But Count Olaf just sat there as calmly as if they were discussing the weather.

“I guess you’ve found me out,” Olaf said simply. “I suppose you’re right: I’ll go to prison, and you and the other orphans will go free. Now, why don’t you run up to your room and wake your sisters? I’m sure they’ll want to know all about your grand victory over my evil ways.”

Klaus looked closely at Count Olaf, who was continuing to smile as if he had just told a clever joke. Why wasn’t he threatening Klaus in anger, or tearing his hair out in frustration, or running to pack his clothes and escape? This wasn’t happening at all the way Klaus had pictured it.

“Well, I *will* go tell my sisters,” he said, and walked back into his bedroom. Violet was still dozing on the bed and Sunny was still hidden beneath the curtains. Klaus woke Violet up first.

“I stayed up all night reading,” Klaus said breathlessly, as his sister opened her eyes, “and I discovered what Count Olaf is up to. He plans to marry you for real, when you and Justice Strauss and everyone all think it’s just a play, and once he’s your husband he’ll have control of our parents’ money and he can dispose of us.”

“How can he marry me for real?” Violet asked. “It’s only a play.”

“The only legal requirements of marriage in this community,” Klaus explained, holding up *Nuptial Law* to show his sister where he’d learned the information, “are your saying ‘I do,’ and signing a document in your own hand in the presence of a judge—like Justice Strauss!”

“But surely I’m not old enough to get married,” Violet said. “I’m only fourteen.”

“Girls under the age of eighteen,” Klaus said, flipping to another part of the book, “can marry if they have the permission of their legal guardian. That’s Count Olaf.”

“Oh no!” Violet cried. “What can we do?”

“We can show this to Mr. Poe,” Klaus said, pointing to the book, “and he will finally believe us that Count Olaf is up to no good. Quick, get dressed while I wake up Sunny, and we can be at the bank by the time it opens.”

Violet, who usually moved slowly in the mornings, nodded and immediately got out of bed and went to the cardboard box to find some proper clothing. Klaus walked over to the lump of curtains to wake up his younger sister.

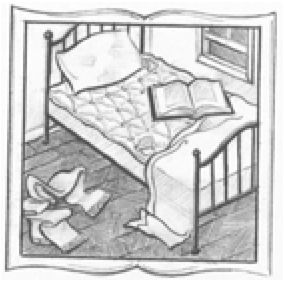
“Sunny,” he called out kindly, putting his hand on where he thought his sister’s head was. “Sunny.”

There was no answer. Klaus called out “Sunny” again, and pulled away the top fold of the curtains to wake up the youngest Baudelaire child. “Sunny,” he said, but then he stopped. For underneath the curtain was nothing but another curtain. He moved aside all the layers, but his little sister was nowhere to be found. “*Sunny*!” he yelled, looking around the room. Violet dropped the dress she was holding and began to help him search. They looked in every corner, under the bed, and even inside the cardboard box. But Sunny was gone.

“Where can she be?” Violet asked worriedly. “She’s not the type to run off.”

“Where can she be indeed?” said a voice behind them, and the two children turned around. Count Olaf was standing in the doorway, watching Violet and Klaus as they searched the room. His eyes were shining brighter than they ever had, and he was still smiling like he’d just uttered a joke.

CHAPTER
Nine



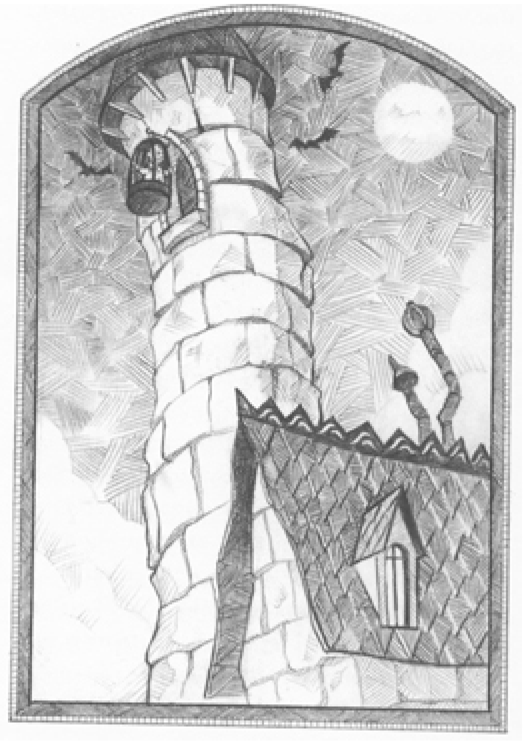
"*Yes*," Count Olaf continued, "it certainly is strange to find a child missing. And one so small, and helpless."

"Where's Sunny?" Violet cried. "What have you done with her?"

Count Olaf continued to speak as if he had not heard Violet. "But then again, one sees strange things every day. In fact, if you two orphans follow me out to the backyard, I think we will all see something rather unusual."

The Baudelaire children didn't say anything, but followed Count Olaf through the house and out the back door. Violet looked around the small, scraggly yard, in which she had not been since she and Klaus had been forced to chop wood. The pile of logs they had made was still lying there untouched, as if Count Olaf had merely made them chop logs for his own amusement, rather than for any purpose. Violet shivered, still in her nightgown, but as she gazed here and there she saw nothing unusual.

"You're not looking in the right place," Count Olaf said. "For children who read so much, you two are remarkably unintelligent."



Violet looked over in the direction of Count Olaf, but could not meet his eyes. The eyes on his face, that is. She was staring at his feet, and could see the tattooed eye that had been watching the Baudelaire orphans since their troubles had begun. Then her eyes traveled up Count Olaf's lean, shabbily dressed body, and she saw that he was pointing up with one scrawny hand. She followed his gesture and found herself looking at the forbidden tower. It was made of dirty stone, with only one lone window, and just barely visible in the window was what looked like a birdcage.

"Oh no," Klaus said in a small, scared voice, and Violet looked again. It *was* a birdcage, dangling from the tower window like a flag in the wind, but inside the birdcage she could see a small and frightened Sunny. When Violet looked closely, she could see there was a large piece of tape across her sister's mouth, and ropes around her body. She was utterly trapped.

"Let her go!" Violet said to Count Olaf. "She has done nothing to you! She is an *infant*!"

"Well, now," Count Olaf said, sitting on a stump. "If you really want me to let her go, I will. But surely even a stupid brat like you might realize that if I let her go—or, more accurately, if I ask my comrade to let her go—poor little Sunny might not survive the fall down to the ground. That's a thirty-foot tower, which is a very long way for a very little person to fall, even when she's inside a cage. But if you insist—"

"*No*!" Klaus cried. "*Don't*!"

Violet looked into Count Olaf's eyes, and then at the small parcel that was her sister, hanging from the top of the tower and moving slowly in the breeze. She pictured Sunny toppling from the tower and onto the ground, pictured her sister's last thoughts being ones of sheer terror. "*Please*," she said to Olaf, feeling tears in her eyes. "She's just a baby. We'll do *anything, anything*. Just don't harm her."

"*Anything*?" Count Olaf asked, his eyebrow rising. He leaned in toward Violet and gazed into her eyes. "*Anything*? Would you, for instance, consider marrying me during tomorrow night's performance?"

Violet stared at him. She had an odd feeling in her stomach, as if *she* were the one being thrown from a great height. The really frightening thing about Olaf, she realized, was that he was very smart after all. He wasn't merely an unsavory drunken brute, but an unsavory, *clever* drunken brute.

"While you were busy reading books and making accusations," Count Olaf said, "I had one of my quietest, sneakiest assistants skulk into your bedroom and steal little Sunny away. She is perfectly safe, for now. But I consider her to be a stick behind a stubborn mule."

"Our sister is not a stick," Klaus said.

"A stubborn mule," Count Olaf explained, "does not move in the direction its owner wants it to. In that way, it is like you children, who insist on mucking up my plans. Any animal owner will tell you that a stubborn mule will move in the proper direction if there is a carrot in front of it, and a stick behind it. It will move toward the carrot, because it wants the reward of food, and away from the stick, because it does not want the punishment of pain. Likewise, you will do what I say, to avoid the punishment of the loss of your sister, and because you want the reward of surviving this experience. Now, Violet, let me ask you again: *will* you marry me?"

Violet swallowed, and looked down at Count Olaf's tattoo. She could not bring herself to answer.

"Come now," Count Olaf said, his voice faking—a word which here means "feigning"—kindness. He reached out a hand and stroked Violet's hair. "Would it be so terrible to be my bride, to live in my house for the rest of your life? You're such a lovely girl, after the marriage I wouldn't dispose of you like your brother and sister."

Violet imagined sleeping beside Count Olaf, and waking up each morning to look at this terrible man. She pictured wandering around the house, trying to avoid him all day, and cooking for his terrible friends at night, perhaps every night, for the rest of her life. But then she looked up at her helpless sister and knew what her answer must be. "If you let Sunny go," she said finally, "I will marry you."

"I will let Sunny go," Count Olaf answered, "after tomorrow night's performance. In the meantime, she will remain in the tower for safekeeping. And, as a warning, I will tell you that my assistants will stand guard at the door to the tower staircase, in case you were getting any ideas."

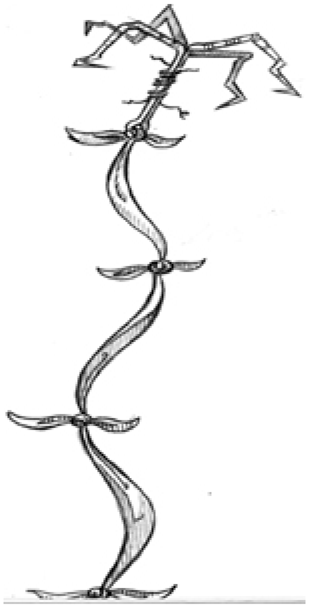
"You're a terrible man," Klaus spat out, but Count Olaf merely smiled again

"I may be a terrible man," Count Olaf said, "but I have been able to concoct a foolproof way of getting your fortune, which is more than you've been able to do." With that, he began to stride toward the house. "Remember that, orphans," he said. "You may have read more books than I have, but it didn't help you gain the upper hand in this situation. Now, give me that book which gave you such grand ideas, and do the chores assigned to you."

Klaus sighed, and relinquished—a word which here means "gave to Count Olaf even though he didn't want to"—the book on nuptial law. He began to follow Count Olaf into the house, but Violet stayed still as a statue.

She hadn’t been listening to that last speech of Count Olaf’s, knowing it would be full of the usual self-congratulatory nonsense and despicable insults. She was staring at the tower, not at the top, where her sister was dangling, but the whole length of it. Klaus looked back at her and saw something he hadn’t seen in quite some time. To those who hadn’t been around Violet long, nothing would have seemed unusual, but those who knew her well knew that when she tied her hair up in a ribbon to keep it out of her eyes, it meant that the gears and levers of her inventing brain were whirring at top speed.

CHAPTER
Ten



That night, Klaus was the Baudelaire orphan sleeping fitfully in the bed, and Violet was the Baudelaire orphan staying up, working by the light of the moon. All day, the two siblings had wandered around the house, doing the assigned chores and scarcely speaking to each other. Klaus was too tired and despondent to speak, and Violet was holed up in the inventing area of her mind, too busy planning to talk.

When night approached, Violet gathered up the curtains that had been Sunny's bed and brought them to the door to the tower stairs, where the enormous assistant of Count Olaf's, the one who looked like neither a man nor a woman, was standing guard. Violet asked whether she could bring the blankets to her sister, to make her more comfortable during the night. The enormous creature merely looked at Violet with its blank white eyes and shook its head, then dismissed her with a silent gesture.

Violet knew, of course, that Sunny was too terrified to be comforted by a handful of draperies, but she hoped that she would be allowed a few moments to hold her and tell her that everything would turn out all right. Also, she wanted to do something known in the crime industry as “casing the joint.” “Casing the joint” means observing a particular location in order to formulate a plan. For instance, if you are a bank robber—although I hope you aren’t—you might go to the bank a few days before you planned to rob it. Perhaps wearing a disguise, you would look around the bank and observe security guards, cameras, and other obstacles, so you could plan how to avoid capture or death during your burglary.

Violet, a law-abiding citizen, was not planning to rob a bank, but she was planning to rescue Sunny, and was hoping to catch a glimpse of the tower room in which her sister was being held prisoner, so as to make her plan more easily. But it appeared that she wasn’t going to be able to case the joint after all. This made Violet nervous as she sat on the floor by the window, working on her invention as quietly as she could.

Violet had very few materials with which to invent something, and she didn’t want to wander around the house looking for more for fear of arousing the suspicions of Count Olaf and his troupe. But she had enough to build a rescuing device. Above the window was a sturdy metal rod from which the curtains had hung, and Violet took it down. Using one of the rocks Olaf had left in a pile in the corner, she broke the curtain rod into two pieces. She then bent each piece of the rod into several sharp angles, leaving tiny cuts on her hands as she did so. Then Violet took down the painting of the eye. On the back of the painting, as on the back of many paintings, was a small piece of wire to hang on the hook. She removed the wire and used it to connect the two pieces together. Violet had now made what looked like a large metal spider.

She then went over to the cardboard box and took out the ugliest of the clothes that Mrs. Poe had purchased, the outfits the Baudelaire orphans would never wear no matter how desperate they were. Working quickly and quietly, she began to tear these into long, narrow strips, and to tie these strips together. Among Violet's many useful skills was a vast knowledge of different types of knots. The particular knot she was using was called the Devil's Tongue. A group of female Finnish pirates invented it back in the fifteenth century, and named it the Devil's Tongue because it twisted this way and that, in a most complicated and eerie way. The Devil's Tongue was a very useful knot, and when Violet tied the cloth strips together, end to end, it formed a sort of rope. As she worked, she remembered something her parents had said to her when Klaus was born, and again when they brought Sunny home from the hospital. "You are the eldest Baudelaire child," they had said, kindly but firmly. "And as the eldest, it will always be your responsibility to look after your younger siblings. Promise us that you will always watch out for them and make sure they don't get into trouble." Violet remembered her promise, and thought of Klaus, whose bruised face still looked sore, and Sunny, dangling from the top of the tower like a flag, and began working faster. Even though Count Olaf was of course the cause of all this misery, Violet felt as if she had broken her promise to her parents, and vowed to make it right.

Eventually, using enough of the ugly clothing, Violet had a rope that was, she hoped, just over thirty feet long. She tied one end of it to the metal spider, and looked at her handiwork. What she had made was called a grappling hook, which is something used for climbing up the sides of buildings, usually for a nefarious purpose. Using the metal end to hook onto something at the top of the tower, and the rope to aid her climb, Violet hoped to reach the top of the tower, untie Sunny's cage, and climb back down. This was, of course, a very risky plan, both because it was dangerous, and because she had made the grappling hook herself, instead of purchasing it at a store that sold such things. But a grappling hook was all Violet could think of to make without a proper inventing laboratory, and time was running short. She hadn't told Klaus about her plan, because she didn't want to give him false hope, so without waking him, she gathered up her grappling hook and tiptoed out of the room.

Once outside, Violet realized her plan was even more difficult than she had thought. The night was quiet, which would mean she would have to make practically no noise at all. The night also had a slight breeze, and when she pictured herself swinging in the breeze, clinging to a rope made of ugly clothing, she almost gave up entirely. And the night was dark, so it was hard to see where she could toss the grappling hook and have the metal arms hook onto something. But, standing there shivering in her nightgown, Violet knew she had to try. Using her right hand, she threw the grappling hook as high and as hard as she could, and waited to see if it would catch onto something.

Clang! The hook made a loud noise as it hit the tower, but it didn't stick to anything, and came crashing back down. Her heart pounding, Violet stood stock-still, wondering if Count Olaf or one of his accomplices would come and investigate. But nobody arrived after a few moments, and Violet, swinging the hook over her head like a lasso, tried again.

Clang! Clang! The grappling hook hit the tower twice as it bounced back down to the ground. Violet waited again, listening for footsteps, but all she heard was her own terrified pulse. She decided to try one more time.

Clang! The grappling hook hit the tower, and fell down again, hitting Violet hard in the shoulder. One of the arms tore her nightgown and cut through her skin. Biting down on her hand to keep from crying out in pain, Violet felt the place in her shoulder where she had been struck, and it was wet with blood. Her arm throbbed in pain.

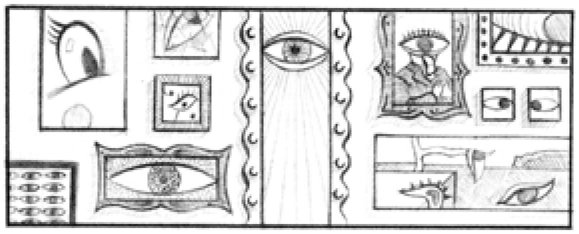
At this point in the proceedings, if I were Violet, I would have given up, but just as she was about to turn around and go inside the house, she pictured how scared Sunny must be, and, ignoring the pain in her shoulder, Violet used her right hand to throw the hook again.

Cla—The usual *clang*! sound stopped halfway through, and Violet saw in the dim light of the moon that the hook wasn't falling. Nervously, she gave the rope a good yank, and it stayed put. The grappling hook had worked!

Her feet touching the side of the stone tower and her hands grasping the rope, Violet closed her eyes and began to climb. Never daring to look around, she pulled herself up the tower, hand over hand, all the time keeping in mind her promise to her parents and the horrible things Count Olaf would do if his villainous plan worked. The evening wind blew harder and harder as she climbed higher and higher, and several times Violet had to stop climbing as the rope moved in the wind. She was certain that at any moment the cloth would tear, or the hook would slip, and Violet would be sent tumbling to her death. But thanks to her adroit inventing skills—the word “adroit” here means “skillful”—everything worked the way it was supposed to work, and suddenly Violet found herself feeling a piece of metal instead of a cloth rope. She opened her eyes and saw her sister Sunny, who was looking at her frantically and trying to say something past the strip of tape. Violet had arrived at the top of the tower, right at the window where Sunny was tied.

The eldest Baudelaire orphan was about to grab her sister’s cage and begin her descent when she saw something that made her stop. It was the spidery end of the grappling hook, which after several attempts had finally stuck onto something on the tower. Violet had guessed, during her climb, that it had found some notch in the stone, or part of the window, or perhaps a piece of furniture inside the tower room, and stuck there. But that wasn’t what the hook had stuck on. Violet’s grappling hook had stuck on another hook. It was one of the hooks on the hook-handed man. And his other hook, Violet saw, was glinting in the moonlight as it reached right toward her.

CHAPTER
Eleven



“*How* pleasant that you could join us,” the hook-handed man said in a sickly sweet voice. Violet immediately tried to scurry back down the rope, but Count Olaf’s assistant was too quick for her. In one movement he hoisted her into the tower room and, with a flick of his hook, sent her rescue device clanging to the ground. Now Violet was as trapped as her sister. “I’m so glad you’re here,” the hook-handed man said. “I was just thinking how much I wanted to see your pretty face. Have a seat.”

“What are you going to do with me?” Violet asked.

“I said *have a seat*!” the hook-handed man snarled, and pushed her into a chair.

Violet looked around the dim and messy room. I am certain that over the course of your own life, you have noticed that people’s rooms reflect their personalities. In my room, for instance, I have gathered a collection of objects that are important to me, including a dusty accordion on which I can play a few sad songs, a large bundle of notes on the activities of the Baudelaire orphans, and a blurry photograph, taken a very long time ago, of a woman whose name is Beatrice. These are items that are very precious and dear to me. The tower room held objects that were very dear and precious to Count Olaf, and they were terrible things. There were scraps of paper on which he had written his evil ideas in an illegible scrawl, lying in messy piles on top of the copy of *Nuptial Law* he had taken away from Klaus. There were a few chairs and a handful of candles which were giving off flickering shadows. Littered all over the floor were empty wine bottles and dirty dishes. But most of all were the drawings and paintings and carvings of eyes, big and small, all over the room. There were eyes painted on the ceilings, and scratched into the grimy wooden floors. There were eyes scrawled along the windowsill, and one big eye painted on the knob of the door that led to the stairs. It was a terrible place.

The hook-handed man reached into a pocket of his greasy overcoat and pulled out a walkie-talkie. With some difficulty, he pressed a button and waited a moment. “Boss, it’s me,” he said. “Your blushing bride just climbed up here to try and rescue the biting brat.” He paused as Count Olaf said something. “I don’t know. With some sort of rope.”

“It was a grappling hook,” Violet said, and tore off a sleeve of her nightgown to make a bandage for her shoulder. “I made it myself.”

“She says it was a grappling hook,” the hook-handed man said into the walkie-talkie. “I don’t know, boss. Yes, boss. Yes, boss, of course I understand she’s *yours*. Yes, boss.” He pressed a button to disconnect the line, and then turned to face Violet. “Count Olaf is very displeased with his bride.”

“I’m not his bride,” Violet said bitterly.

“Very soon you will be,” the hook-handed man said, wagging his hook the way most people would wag a finger. “In the meantime, however, I have to go and fetch your brother. The three of you will be locked in this room until night falls. That way, Count Olaf can be sure you will all stay out of mischief.” With that, the hook-handed man stomped out of the room. Violet heard the door lock behind him, and then listened to his footsteps fading away down the stairs. She immediately went over to Sunny, and put a hand on her little head. Afraid to untie or untape her sister for fear of incurring—a word which here means “bringing about”—Count Olaf’s wrath, Violet stroked Sunny’s hair and murmured that everything was all right.

But of course, everything was *not* all right. Everything was all wrong. As the first light of morning trickled into the tower room, Violet reflected on all the awful things she and her siblings had experienced recently. Their parents had died, suddenly and horribly. Mrs. Poe had bought them ugly clothing. They had moved into Count Olaf's house and were treated terribly. Mr. Poe had refused to help them. They had discovered a fiendish plot involving marrying Violet and stealing the Baudelaire fortune. Klaus had tried to confront Olaf with knowledge he'd learned in Justice Strauss's library and failed. Poor Sunny had been captured. And now, Violet had tried to rescue Sunny and found herself captured as well. All in all, the Baudelaire orphans had encountered catastrophe after catastrophe, and Violet found their situation lamentably deplorable, a phrase which here means "it was not at all enjoyable."

The sound of footsteps coming up the stairs brought Violet out of her thoughts, and soon the hook-handed man opened the door and thrust a very tired, confused, and scared Klaus into the room.

"Here's the last orphan," the hook-handed man said. "And now, I must go help Count Olaf with final preparations for tonight's performance. No monkey business, you two, or I will have to tie you up and let you dangle out of the window as well." Glaring at them, he locked the door again and tromped downstairs.

Klaus blinked and looked around the filthy room. He was still in his pajamas. "What has happened?" he asked Violet. "Why are we up here?"

"I tried to rescue Sunny," Violet said, "using an invention of mine to climb up the tower."

Klaus went over to the window and looked down at the ground. "It's so high up," he said. "You must have been terrified."

"It was very scary," she admitted, "but not as scary as the thought of marrying Count Olaf."

"I'm sorry your invention didn't work," Klaus said sadly.

“The invention worked fine,” Violet said, rubbing her sore shoulder. “I just got caught. And now we’re doomed. The hook-handed man said he’d keep us here until tonight, and then it’s *The Marvelous Marriage*.”

“Do you think you could invent something that would help us escape?” Klaus asked, looking around the room.

“Maybe,” Violet said. “And why don’t you go through those books and papers? Perhaps there’s some information that could be of use.”

For the next few hours, Violet and Klaus searched the room and their own minds for anything that might help them. Violet looked for objects with which she could invent something. Klaus read through Count Olaf’s papers and books. From time to time, they would go over to Sunny and smile at her, and pat her head, to reassure her. Occasionally, Violet and Klaus would speak to each other, but mostly they were silent, lost in their own thoughts.

“If we had any kerosene,” Violet said, around noon, “I could make Molotov cocktails with these bottles.”

“What are Molotov cocktails?” Klaus asked.

“They’re small bombs made inside bottles,” Violet explained. “We could throw them out the window and attract the attention of passersby.”

“But we don’t have any kerosene,” Klaus said mournfully.

They were silent for several hours.

“If we were polygamists,” Klaus said, “Count Olaf’s marriage plan wouldn’t work.”

“What are polygamists?” Violet asked.

“Polygamists are people who marry more than one person,’” Klaus explained. “In this community, polygamists are breaking the law, even if they have married in the presence of a judge, with the statement of ‘I do’ and the signed document in their own hand. I read it here in *Nuptial Law*.”

“But we’re not polygamists,” Violet said mournfully.

They were silent for several *more* hours.

“We could break these bottles in half,” Violet said, “and use them as knives, but I’m afraid that Count Olaf’s troupe would overpower us.”

“You could say ‘I don’t’ instead of ‘I do,’” Klaus said, “but I’m afraid Count Olaf would order Sunny dropped off the tower.”

“I certainly would,” Count Olaf said, and the children jumped. They had been so involved in their conversation that they hadn’t heard him come up the stairs and open the door. He was wearing a fancy suit and his eyebrow had been waxed so it looked as shiny as his eyes. Behind him stood the hook-handed man, who smiled and waved a hook at the youngsters. “Come, orphans,” Count Olaf said. “It is time for the big event. My associate here will stay behind in this room, and we will keep in constant contact through our walkie-talkies. If *anything* goes wrong during tonight’s performance, your sister will be dropped to her death. Come along now.”

Violet and Klaus looked at each other, and then at Sunny, still dangling in her cage, and followed Count Olaf out the door. As Klaus walked down the tower stairs, he felt a heavy sinking in his heart as all hope left him. There truly seemed to be no way out of their predicament. Violet was feeling the same way, until she reached out with her right hand to grasp the banister, for balance. She looked at her right hand for a second, and began to think. All the way down the stairs, and out the door, and the short walk down the block to the theater, Violet thought and thought and thought, harder than she had in her entire life.

CHAPTER
Twelve

As Violet and Klaus Baudelaire stood, still in their nightgown and pajamas, backstage at Count Olaf's theater, they were of two minds, a phrase which here means "they felt two different ways at the same time." On one hand, they were of course filled with dread. From the murmur of voices they heard on the stage, the two Baudelaire orphans could tell that the performance of *The Marvelous Marriage* had begun, and it seemed too late to do anything to foil Count Olaf's plan. On the other hand, however, they were fascinated, as they had never been backstage at a theatrical production and there was so much to see. Members of Count Olaf's theater troupe hurried this way and that, too busy to even glance at the children. Three very short men were carrying a large flat piece of wood, painted to look like a living room. The two white-faced women were arranging flowers in a vase that from far away appeared to be marble, but close up looked more like cardboard. An important-looking man with warts all over his face was adjusting enormous light fixtures. As the children peeked onstage, they could see Count Olaf, in his fancy suit, declaiming some lines from the play, just as the curtain came down, controlled by a woman with very short hair who was pulling on a long rope, attached to a pulley. Despite their fear, you see, the two older Baudelaires were very interested in what was going on, and only wished that they were not involved in any way.

As the curtain fell, Count Olaf strode offstage and looked at the children. “It’s the end of Act Two! Why aren’t the orphans in their costumes?” he hissed to the two white-faced women. Then, as the audience broke into applause, his angry expression turned to one of joy, and he walked back onstage. Gesturing to the short-haired woman to raise the curtain, he strode to the exact center of the stage and took elaborate bows as the curtain came up. He waved and blew kisses to the audience as the curtain came down again, and then his face once again filled with anger. “Intermission is only ten minutes,” he said, “and then the children must perform. Get them into costumes, quickly!”

Without a word the two white-faced women grabbed Violet and Klaus by the wrists and led them into a dressing room. The room was dusty but shiny, covered in mirrors and tiny lights so the actors could see better to put on their makeup and wigs, and there were people calling out to one another and laughing as they changed their clothes. One white-faced woman yanked Violet’s arms up and pulled her nightgown off over her head, and thrust a dirty, lacy white dress at her to put on. Klaus, meanwhile, had his pajamas removed by the other white-faced woman, and was hurriedly stuffed into a blue sailor suit that itched and made him look like a toddler.

“Isn’t this exciting?” said a voice, and the children turned to see Justice Strauss, all dressed up in her judge’s robes and powdered wig. She was clutching a small book. “You children look wonderful!”

“So do you,” Klaus said. “What’s that book?”

“Why, those are my lines,” Justice Strauss said. “Count Olaf told me to bring a law book and read the real wedding ceremony, in order to make the play as realistic as possible. All *you* have to say, Violet, is ‘I do,’ but I have to make quite a speech. This is going to be such fun.”

“You know what would be fun,” Violet said carefully, “is if you changed your lines around, just a little.”

Klaus’s face lit up. “Yes, Justice Strauss. Be creative. There’s no reason to stick to the legal ceremony. It’s not as if it’s a real wedding.”

Justice Strauss frowned. “I don’t know about that, children,” she said. “I think it would be best to follow Count Olaf’s instructions. After all, he’s in charge.”

“Justice Strauss!” a voice called. “Justice Strauss! Please report to the makeup artist!”

“Oh my word! I get to wear makeup.” Justice Strauss had on a dreamy expression, as if she were about to be crowned queen, instead of just having some powders and creams smeared on her face. “Children, I must go. See you onstage, my dears!”

Justice Strauss ran off, leaving the children to finish changing into their costumes. One of the white-faced women put a flowered headdress on Violet, who realized in horror that the dress she had changed into was a bridal gown. The other woman put a sailor cap on Klaus, who gazed in one of the mirrors, astonished at how ugly he looked. His eyes met those of Violet, who was looking in the mirror as well.

“What can we do?” Klaus said quietly. “Pretend to be sick? Maybe they’d call off the performance.”

“Count Olaf would know what we were up to,” Violet replied glumly.

“Act Three of *The Marvelous Marriage* by Al Funcoot is about to begin!” a man with a clipboard shouted. “Everyone, please, get in your places for Act Three!”

The actors rushed out of the room, and the white-faced women grabbed the children and hustled them out after them. The backstage area was in complete pandemonium—a word which here means “actors and stagehands running around attending to last-minute details.” The bald man with the long nose hurried by the children, then stopped himself, looked at Violet in her wedding dress, and smirked.

“No funny stuff,” he said to them, waggling a bony finger. “Remember, when you go out there, just do exactly what you’re supposed to do. Count Olaf will be holding his walkie-talkie during the entire act, and if you do even *one thing* wrong, he’ll be giving Sunny a call up there in the tower.”

“Yes, yes,” Klaus said bitterly. He was tired of being threatened in the same way, over and over.

“You’d better do exactly as planned,” the man said again.

“I’m sure they will,” said a voice suddenly, and the children turned to see Mr. Poe, dressed very formally and accompanied by his wife. He smiled at the children and came over to shake their hands. “Polly and I just wanted to tell you to break a leg.”

“What?” Klaus said, alarmed.

“That’s a theater term,” Mr. Poe explained, “meaning ‘good luck on tonight’s performance.’ I’m glad that you children have adjusted to life with your new father and are participating in family activities.”

“Mr. Poe,” Klaus said quickly, “Violet and I have something to tell you. It’s very important.”

“What is it?” Mr. Poe said.

“Yes,” said Count Olaf, “what is it you have to tell Mr. Poe, children?”

Count Olaf had appeared, seemingly out of nowhere, and his shiny eyes glared at the children meaningfully. In one hand, Violet and Klaus could see, he held a walkie-talkie.

“Just that we appreciate all you’ve done for us, Mr. Poe,” Klaus said weakly. “That’s all we wanted to say.”

“Of course, of course,” Mr. Poe said, patting him on the back. “Well, Polly and I had better take our seats. Break a leg, Baudelaires!”

“I wish we *could* break a leg,” Klaus whispered to Violet, and Mr. Poe left.

“You will, soon enough,” Count Olaf said, pushing the two children toward the stage. Other actors were milling about, finding their places for Act Three, and Justice Strauss was off in a corner, practicing her lines from her law book. Klaus took a look around the stage, wondering if anyone there could help. The bald man with the long nose took Klaus’s hand and led him to one side.

“You and I will stand *here* for the duration of the act. That means the whole thing.”

“I *know* what the word ‘duration’ means,” Klaus said.

“No nonsense,” the bald man said. Klaus watched his sister in her wedding gown take her place next to Count Olaf as the curtain rose. Klaus heard applause from the audience as Act Three of *The Marvelous Marriage* began.

It will be of no interest to you if I describe the action of this insipid—the word “insipid” here means “dull and foolish”—play by Al Funcoot, because it was a dreadful play and of no real importance to our story. Various actors and actresses performed very dull dialogue and moved around the set, as Klaus tried to make eye contact with them and see if they would help. He soon realized that this play must have been chosen merely as an excuse for Olaf’s evil plan, and not for its entertainment value, as he sensed the audience losing interest and moving around in their seats. Klaus turned his attention to the audience to see whether any of them would notice that something was afoot, but the way the wart-faced man had arranged the lights prevented Klaus from seeing the faces in the auditorium, and he could only make out the dim outlines of the people in the audience. Count Olaf had a great number of very long speeches, which he performed with elaborate gestures and facial expressions. No one seemed to notice that he held a walkie-talkie the entire time.

Finally, Justice Strauss began speaking, and Klaus saw that she was reading directly from the legal book. Her eyes were sparkling and her face flushed as she performed onstage for the first time, too stagestruck to realize she was a part of Olaf's plan. She spoke on and on about Olaf and Violet caring for each other in sickness and in health, in good times and bad, and all of those things that are said to many people who decide, for one reason or another, to get married.

When she finished her speech, Justice Strauss turned to Count Olaf and asked, "Do you take this woman to be your lawfully wedded wife?"

"I do," Count Olaf said, smiling. Klaus saw Violet shudder.

"Do *you*," Justice Strauss said, turning to Violet, "take this man to be your lawfully wedded husband?"

"I do," Violet said. Klaus clenched his fists. His sister had said "I do" in the presence of a judge. Once she signed the official document, the wedding was legally valid. And now, Klaus could see that Justice Strauss was taking the document from one of the other actors and holding it out to Violet to sign.

"Don't move an inch," the bald man muttered to Klaus, and Klaus thought of poor Sunny, dangling at the top of the tower, and stood still as he watched Violet take a long quill pen from Count Olaf. Violet's eyes were wide as she looked down at the document, and her face was pale, and her left hand was trembling as she signed her name.

CHAPTER
Thirteen

"*And* now, ladies and gentlemen," Count Olaf said, stepping forward to address the audience, "I have an announcement. There is no reason to continue tonight's performance, for its purpose has been served. This has not been a scene of fiction. My marriage to Violet Baudelaire is perfectly legal, and now I am in control of her entire fortune."

There were gasps from the audience, and some of the actors looked at one another in shock. Not everyone, apparently, had known about Olaf's plan. "That can't be!" Justice Strauss cried.

"The marriage laws in this community are quite simple," Count Olaf said. "The bride must say 'I do' in the presence of a judge like yourself, and sign an explanatory document. And all of you"—here Count Olaf gestured out to the audience—"are witnesses."

"But Violet is only a child!" one of the actors said. "She's not old enough to marry."

"She is if her legal guardian agrees," Count Olaf said, "and in addition to being her husband, I am her legal guardian."

“But that piece of paper is not an official document!” Justice Strauss said. “That’s just a stage prop!”

Count Olaf took the paper from Violet’s hand and gave it to Justice Strauss. “I think if you look at it closely you will see it is an official document from City Hall.”

Justice Strauss took the document in her hand and read it quickly. Then, closing her eyes, she sighed deeply and furrowed her brow, thinking hard. Klaus watched her and wondered if this were the expression Justice Strauss had on her face whenever she was serving on the High Court. “You’re right,” she said finally, to Count Olaf, “this marriage, unfortunately, is completely legal. Violet said ‘I do,’ and signed her name here on this paper. Count Olaf, you are Violet’s husband, and therefore in complete control of her estate.”

“That can’t be!” said a voice from the audience, and Klaus recognized it as the voice of Mr. Poe. He ran up the stairs to the stage and took the document from Justice Strauss. “This is dreadful nonsense.”

“I’m afraid this dreadful nonsense is the law,” Justice Strauss said. Her eyes were filling up with tears. “I can’t believe how easily I was tricked,” she said. “I would never do anything to harm you children. *Never*.”

“You *were* easily tricked,” Count Olaf said, grinning, and the judge began to cry. “It was child’s play, winning this fortune. Now, if all of you will excuse me, my bride and I need to go home for our wedding night.”

“First let Sunny go!” Klaus burst out. “You promised to let her go!”

“Where is Sunny?” Mr. Poe asked.

“She’s all tied up at the moment,” Count Olaf said, “if you will pardon a little joke.” His eyes shone as he pressed buttons on the walkie-talkie, and waited while the hook-handed man answered. “Hello? Yes, of course it’s me, you idiot. Everything has gone according to plan. Please remove Sunny from her cage and bring her directly to the theater. Klaus and Sunny have some chores to do before they go to bed." Count Olaf gave Klaus a sharp look. "Are you satisfied now?" he asked.

"Yes," Klaus said quietly. He wasn't satisfied at all, of course, but at least his baby sister was no longer dangling from a tower.

"Don't think you're so safe," the bald man whispered to Klaus. "Count Olaf will take care of you and your sisters later. He doesn't want to do it in front of all these people." He did not have to explain to Klaus what he meant by the phrase "take care of."

"Well, I'm not satisfied *at all*," Mr. Poe said. "This is absolutely horrendous. This is completely monstrous. This is financially dreadful."

"I'm afraid, however," Count Olaf said, "that it is legally binding. Tomorrow, Mr. Poe, I shall come down to the bank and withdraw the complete Baudelaire fortune."

Mr. Poe opened his mouth as if to say something, but began to cough instead. For several seconds he coughed into a handkerchief while everyone waited for him to speak. "I won't allow it," Mr. Poe finally gasped, wiping his mouth. "I absolutely will not allow it."

"I'm afraid you have to," Count Olaf replied.

"I'm—I'm afraid Olaf is right," Justice Strauss said, through her tears. "This marriage is legally binding."

"Begging your pardon," Violet said suddenly, "but I think you may be wrong."

Everyone turned to look at the eldest Baudelaire orphan.

"What did you say, Countess?" Olaf said.

"I'm *not* your countess," Violet said testily, a word which here means "in an extremely annoyed tone." "At least, I don't *think* I am."

"And why is that?" Count Olaf said.

"I did not sign the document in my own hand, as the law states," Violet said.

"What do you mean? We all saw you!" Count Olaf's eyebrow was beginning to rise in anger.

"I'm afraid your husband is right, dear," Justice Strauss said sadly. "There's no use denying it. There are too many witnesses."

"Like most people," Violet said, "I am right-handed. But I signed the document with my left hand."

"*What*?" Count Olaf cried. He snatched the paper from Justice Strauss and looked down at it. His eyes were shining very bright. "You are a *liar*!" he hissed at Violet.

"No she's not," Klaus said excitedly. "I remember, because I watched her left hand trembling as she signed her name."

"It is impossible to prove," Count Olaf said.

"If you like," Violet said, "I shall be happy to sign my name again, on a separate sheet of paper, with my right hand and then with my left. Then we can see which signature the one on the document most resembles."

"A small detail, like which hand you used to sign," Count Olaf said, "doesn't matter in the least."

"If you don't mind, sir," Mr. Poe said, "I'd like Justice Strauss to make that decision."

Everyone looked at Justice Strauss, who was wiping away the last of her tears. "Let me see," she said quietly, and closed her eyes again. She sighed deeply, and the Baudelaire orphans, and all who liked them, held their breath as Justice Strauss furrowed her brow, thinking hard on the situation. Finally, she smiled. "If Violet is indeed right-handed," she said carefully, "and she signed the document with her left hand, then it follows that the signature does not fulfill the requirements of the nuptial laws. The law clearly states the document must be signed in the bride's *own hand*. Therefore, we can conclude that this marriage is invalid. Violet, you are *not* a countess, and Count Olaf, you are *not* in control of the Baudelaire fortune."

"Hooray!" cried a voice from the audience, and several people applauded. Unless you are a lawyer, it will probably strike you as odd that Count Olaf's plan was defeated by Violet signing with her left hand instead of her right. But the law is an odd thing. For instance, one country in Europe has a law that requires all its bakers to sell bread at the exact same price. A certain island has a law that forbids anyone from removing its fruit. And a town not too far from where you live has a law that bars me from coming within five miles of its borders. Had Violet signed the marriage contract with her right hand, the law would have made her a miserable contessa, but because she signed it with her left, she remained, to her relief, a miserable orphan.

What was good news to Violet and her siblings, of course, was bad news to Count Olaf. Nevertheless, he gave everyone a grim smile. "In that case," he said to Violet, pushing a button on the walkie-talkie, "you will either marry me again, and correctly this time, or I will—"

"Neepo!" Sunny's unmistakable voice rang out over Count Olaf's as she tottered onstage toward her siblings. The hook-handed man followed behind her, his walkie-talkie buzzing and crackling. Count Olaf was too late.

"Sunny! You're safe!" Klaus cried, and embraced her. Violet rushed over and the two older Baudelaires fussed over the youngest one.

"Somebody bring her something to eat," Violet said. "She must be very hungry after hanging in a tower window all that time."

"Cake!" Sunny shrieked.

"*Argh*!" Count Olaf roared. He began to pace back and forth like an animal in a cage, pausing only to point a finger at Violet. "You may not be my wife," he said, "but you are still my daughter, and—"

“Do you honestly think,” Mr. Poe said in an exasperated voice, “that I will allow you to continue to care for these three children, after the treachery I have seen here tonight?”

“The orphans are mine,” Count Olaf insisted, “and with me they shall stay. There is nothing illegal about trying to marry someone.”

“But there *is* something illegal about dangling an infant out of a tower window,” Justice Strauss said indignantly. “You, Count Olaf, will go to jail, and the three children will live with me.”

“Arrest him!” a voice said from the audience, and other people took up the cry.

“Send him to jail!”

“He’s an evil man!”

“And give us our money back! It was a lousy play!”

Mr. Poe took Count Olaf’s arm and, after a brief eruption of coughs, announced in a harsh voice, “I hereby arrest you in the name of the law.”

“Oh, Justice Strauss!” Violet said. “Did you really mean what you said? Can we really live with you?”

“Of course I mean it,” Justice Strauss said. “I am very fond of you children, and I feel responsible for your welfare.”

“Can we use your library every day?” Klaus asked.

“Can we work in the garden?” Violet asked.

“Cake!” Sunny shrieked again, and everyone laughed.

At this point in the story, I feel obliged to interrupt and give you one last warning. As I said at the very beginning, the book you are holding in your hands does not have a happy ending. It may appear now that Count Olaf will go to jail and that the three Baudelaire youngsters will live happily ever after with Justice Strauss, but it is not so. If you like, you may shut the book this instant and not read the unhappy ending that is to follow. You may spend the rest of your life believing that the Baudelaires triumphed over Count Olaf and lived the rest of their lives in the house and library of Justice Strauss, but that is not how the story goes. For as everyone was laughing at Sunny's cry for cake, the important-looking man with all the warts on his face was sneaking toward the controls for the lighting of the theater.

Quick as a wink, the man flicked the main switch so that all the lights went off and everyone was standing in darkness. Instantly, pandemonium ensued as everyone ran this way and that, shouting at one another. Actors tripped over members of the audience. Members of the audience tripped over theatrical props. Mr. Poe grabbed his wife, thinking it was Count Olaf. Klaus grabbed Sunny and held her up as high as he could, so she wouldn't get hurt. But Violet knew at once what had happened, and made her way carefully to where she remembered the lights had been. When the play was being performed, Violet had watched the light controls carefully, taking mental notes in case these devices came in handy for an invention. She was certain if she could find the switch she could turn it back on. Her arms stretched in front of her as if she were blind, Violet made her way across the stage, stepping carefully around pieces of furniture and startled actors. In the darkness, Violet looked like a ghost, her white wedding gown moving slowly across the stage. Then, just as she had reached the switch, Violet felt a hand on her shoulder. A figure leaned in to whisper into her ear.

"I'll get my hands on your fortune if it's the last thing I do," the voice hissed. "And when I have it, I'll kill you and your siblings with my own two hands."

Violet gave a little cry of terror, but flicked the switch on. The entire theater was flooded with light. Everyone blinked and looked around. Mr. Poe let go of his wife. Klaus put Sunny down. But nobody was touching Violet's shoulder. Count Olaf was gone.

"Where did he go?" Mr. Poe shouted. "Where did they *all* go?"

The Baudelaire youngsters looked around and saw that not only had Count Olaf vanished, but his accomplices—the wart-faced man, the hook-handed man, the bald man with the long nose, the enormous person who looked like neither a man nor a woman, and the two white-faced women—had vanished along with him.

“They must have run outside,” Klaus said, “while it was still dark.”

Mr. Poe led the way outside, and Justice Strauss and the children followed. Way, way down the block, they could see a long black car driving away into the night. Maybe it contained Count Olaf and his associates. Maybe it didn’t. But in any case, it turned a corner and disappeared into the dark city as the children watched without a word.

“Blast it,” Mr. Poe said. “They’re gone. But don’t worry, children, we’ll catch them. I’m going to go call the police immediately.”

Violet, Klaus, and Sunny looked at one another and knew that it wasn’t as simple as Mr. Poe said. Count Olaf would take care to stay out of sight as he planned his next move. He was far too clever to be captured by the likes of Mr. Poe.

“Well, let’s go home, children,” Justice Strauss said. “We can worry about this in the morning, when I’ve fixed you a good breakfast.”

Mr. Poe coughed. “Wait a minute,” he said, looking down at the floor. “I’m sorry to tell you this, children, but I cannot allow you to be raised by someone who is not a relative.”

“What?” Violet cried. “After all Justice Strauss has done for us?”

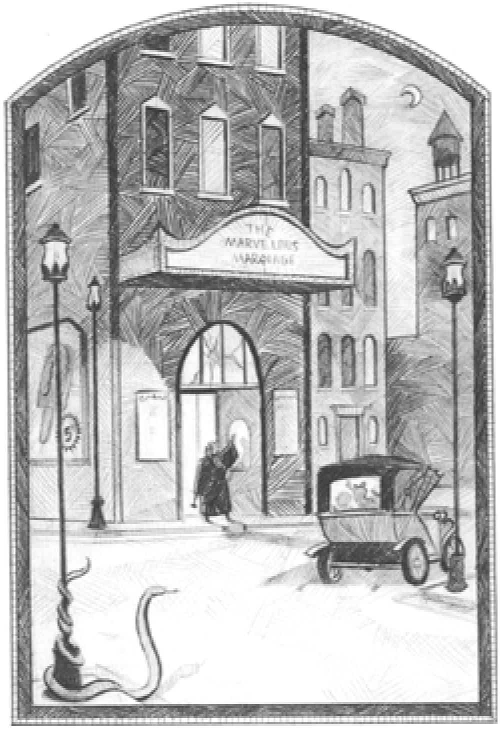
“We never would have figured out Count Olaf’s plan without her and her library,” Klaus said. “Without Justice Strauss, we would have lost our lives.”

“That may be so,” Mr. Poe said, “and I thank Justice Strauss for her generosity, but your parents’ will is very specific. You must be adopted by a relative. Tonight you will stay with me in my home, and tomorrow I shall go to the bank and figure out what to do with you. I'm sorry, but that is the way it is."

The children looked at Justice Strauss, who sighed heavily and hugged each of the Baudelaire youngsters in turn. "Mr. Poe is right," she said sadly. "He must respect your parents' wishes. Don't you want to do what your parents wanted, children?"

Violet, Klaus, and Sunny pictured their loving parents, and wished more than ever that the fire had not occurred. Never, never had they felt so alone. They wanted very badly to live with this kind and generous woman, but they knew that it simply could not be done. "I guess you're right, Justice Strauss," Violet said finally. "We will miss you very much."

"I will miss you, too," she said, and her eyes filled with tears once more. Then they each gave Justice Strauss one last embrace, and followed Mr. and Mrs. Poe to their car. The Baudelaire orphans piled into the backseat, and peered out the back window at Justice Strauss, who was crying and waving to them. Ahead of them were the darkened streets, where Count Olaf had escaped to plan more treachery. Behind them was the kind judge, who had taken such an interest in the three children. To Violet, Klaus, and Sunny, it seemed that Mr. Poe and the law had made the incorrect decision to take them away from the possibility of a happy life with Justice Strauss and toward an unknown fate with some unknown relative. They didn't understand it, but like so many unfortunate events in life, just because you don't understand it doesn't mean it isn't so. The Baudelaires bunched up together against the cold night air, and kept waving out the back window. The car drove farther and farther away, until Justice Strauss was merely a speck in the darkness, and it seemed to the children that they were moving in an aberrant—the word "aberrant" here means "very, very wrong, and causing much grief"—direction.


THE
MARVELOUS
MARRIAGE

To My Kind Editor,

I am writing to you from the London branch of the Herpetological Society, where I am trying to find out what happened to the reptile collection of Dr. Montgomery Montgomery following the tragic events that occurred while the Baudelaire orphans were in his care.

An associate of mine will place a small waterproof box in the phone booth of the Elektra Hotel at 11 P.M. next Tuesday. Please retrieve it before midnight to avoid it falling into the wrong hands. In the box you will find my description of these terrible events, entitled THE REPTILE ROOM, as well as a map of Lousy Lane, a copy of the film *Zombies in the Snow*, and Dr. Montgomery's recipe for coconut cream cake. I have also managed to track down one of the few photographs of Dr. Lucafont, in order to help Mr. Helquist with his illustrations.

Remember, you are my last hope that the tales of the Baudelaire orphans can finally be told to the general public.

With all due respect,

Lemony Snicket

Lemony Snicket

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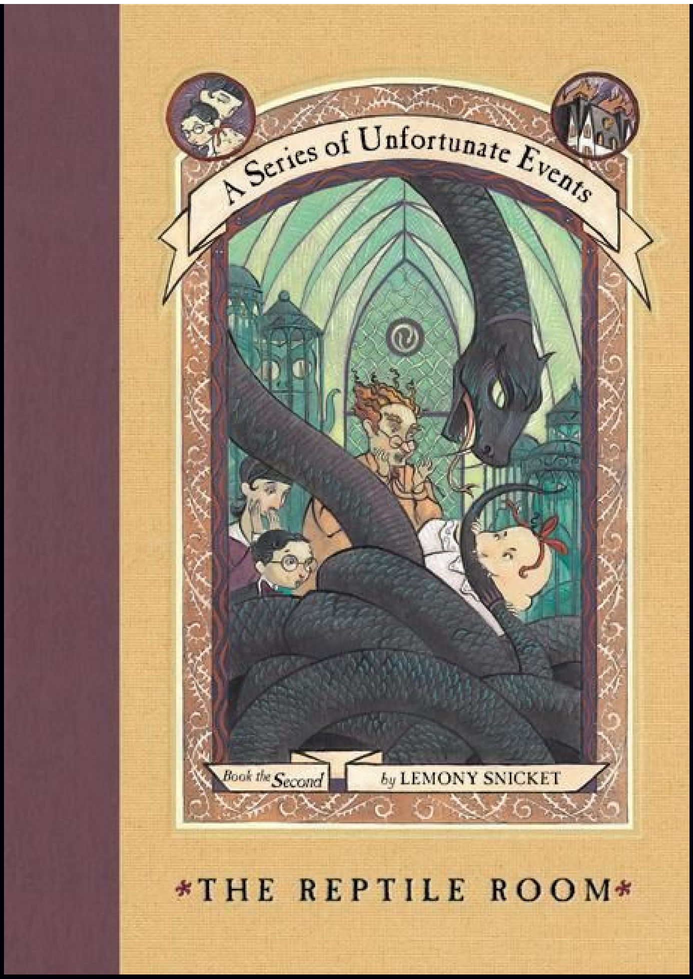
A Series of Unfortunate Events #2: The Reptile Room


A Series of Unfortunate Events
Book the Second
by LEMONY SNICKET
THE REPTILE ROOM

A Series of Unfortunate Events

BOOK the Second

THE REPTILE ROOM

by **LEMONY SNICKET**

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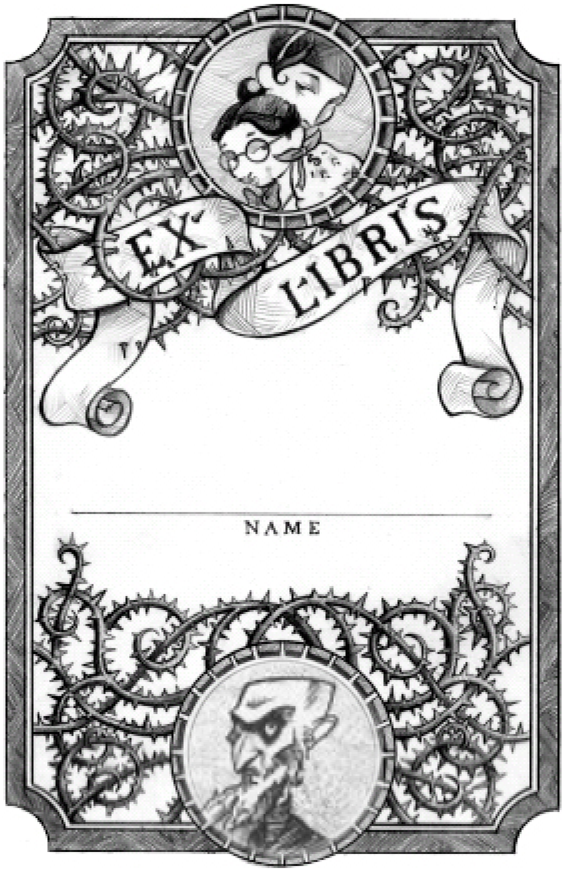

EX LIBRIS
NAME

Dear Reader**,**

If you have picked up this book with the hope of finding a simple and cheery tale, I’m afraid you have picked up the wrong book altogether. The story may seem cheery at first, when the Baudelaire children spend time in the company of some interesting reptiles and a giddy uncle, but don�t be fooled. If you know anything at all about the unlucky Baudelaire children, you already know that even pleasant events lead down the same road to misery.

In fact, within the pages you now hold in your hands, the three siblings endure a car accident, a terrible odor, a deadly serpent, a long knife, a large brass reading lamp, and the reappearance of a person they�d hoped never to see again.

I am bound to record these tragic events, but you are free to put this book back on the shelf and seek something lighter.

With all due respect,

Lemony Snicket

Lemony Snicket

A Series of Unfortunate Events

LEMONY SNICKET

For Beatrice—
My love for you shall live forever.
You, however, did not.

CHAPTER
One

The stretch of road that leads out of the city, past Hazy Harbor and into the town of Tedia, is perhaps the most unpleasant in the world. It is called Lousy Lane. Lousy Lane runs through fields that are a sickly gray color, in which a handful of scraggly trees produce apples so sour that one only has to look at them to feel ill. Lousy Lane traverses the Grim River, a body of water that is nine-tenths mud and that contains extremely unnerving fish, and it encircles a horseradish factory, so the entire area smells bitter and strong.

I am sorry to tell you that this story begins with the Baudelaire orphans traveling along this most displeasing road, and that from this moment on, the story only gets worse. Of all the people in the world who have miserable lives—and, as I'm sure you know, there are quite a few—the Baudelaire youngsters take the cake, a phrase which here means that more horrible things have happened to them than just about anybody. Their misfortune began with an enormous fire that destroyed their home and killed both their loving parents, which is enough sadness to last anyone a lifetime, but in the case of these three children it was only the bad beginning. After the fire, the siblings were sent to live with a distant relative named Count Olaf, a terrible and greedy man. The Baudelaire parents had left behind an enormous fortune, which would go to the children when Violet came of age, and Count Olaf was so obsessed with getting his filthy hands on the money that he hatched a devious plan that gives me nightmares to this day. He was caught just in time, but he escaped and vowed to get ahold of the Baudelaire fortune sometime in the future. Violet, Klaus, and Sunny still had nightmares about Count Olaf's shiny, shiny eyes, and about his one scraggly eyebrow, and most of all about the tattoo of an eye he had on his ankle. It seemed like that eye was watching the Baudelaire orphans wherever they went.

So I must tell you that if you have opened this book in the hope of finding out that the children lived happily ever after, you might as well shut it and read something else. Because Violet, Klaus, and Sunny, sitting in a small, cramped car and staring out the windows at Lousy Lane, were heading toward even more misery and woe. The Grim River and the horseradish factory were only the first of a sequence of tragic and unpleasant episodes that bring a frown to my face and a tear to my eye whenever I think about them.

The driver of the car was Mr. Poe, a family friend who worked at a bank and always had a cough. He was in charge of overseeing the orphans' affairs, so it was he who decided that the children would be placed in the care of a distant relative in the country after all the unpleasantness with Count Olaf.

“I'm sorry if you're uncomfortable,” Mr. Poe said, coughing into a white handkerchief, “but this new car of mine doesn't fit too many people. We couldn't even fit any of your suitcases. In a week or so I'll drive back here and bring them to you.”

“Thank you,” said Violet, who at fourteen was the oldest of the Baudelaire children. Anyone who knew Violet well could see that her mind was not really on what Mr. Poe was saying, because her long hair was tied up in a ribbon to keep it out of her eyes. Violet was an inventor, and when she was thinking up inventions she liked to tie her hair up this way. It helped her think clearly about the various gears, wires, and ropes involved in most of her creations.

“After living so long in the city,” Mr. Poe continued, “I think you will find the countryside to be a pleasant change. Oh, here is the turn. We're almost there.”

“Good,” Klaus said quietly. Klaus, like many people on car rides, was very bored, and he was sad not to have a book with him. Klaus loved to read, and at approximately twelve years of age had read more books than many people read in their whole lives. Sometimes he read well into the night, and in the morning could be found fast asleep, with a book in his hand and his glasses still on.

“I think you’ll like Dr. Montgomery, too,” Mr. Poe said. “He has traveled a great deal, so he has plenty of stories to tell. I’ve heard his house is filled with things he’s brought from all the places he’s been.”

“Bax!” Sunny shrieked. Sunny, the youngest of the Baudelaire orphans, often talked like this, as infants tend to do. In fact, besides biting things with her four very sharp teeth, speaking in fragments was how Sunny spent most of her time. It was often difficult to tell what she meant to say. At this moment she probably meant something along the lines of “I’m nervous about meeting a new relative.” All three children were.

“How exactly is Dr. Montgomery related to us?” Klaus asked.

“Dr. Montgomery is—let me see—your late father’s cousin’s wife’s brother. I think that’s right. He’s a scientist of some sort, and receives a great deal of money from the government.” As a banker, Mr. Poe was always interested in money.

“What should we call him?” Klaus asked.

“You should call him Dr. Montgomery,” Mr. Poe replied, “unless he tells you to call him Montgomery. Both his first and last names are Montgomery, so it doesn’t really make much difference.”

“His name is Montgomery Montgomery?” Klaus said, smiling.

“Yes, and I’m sure he’s very sensitive about that, so don’t ridicule him,” Mr. Poe said, coughing again into his handkerchief. “‘Ridicule’ means ‘tease.’”

Klaus sighed. “I *know* what ‘ridicule’ means,” he said. He did not add that of course he also knew not to make fun of someone’s name. Occasionally, people thought that because the orphans were unfortunate, they were also dim-witted.

Violet sighed too, and took the ribbon out of her hair. She had been trying to think up an invention that would block the smell of horseradish from reaching one’s nose, but she was too nervous about meeting Dr. Montgomery to focus on it. “Do you know what sort of scientist he is?” she asked. She was thinking Dr. Montgomery might have a laboratory that would be of use to her.

“I’m afraid not,” Mr. Poe admitted. “I’ve been very busy making the arrangements for you three, and I didn’t have much time for chitchat. Oh, here’s the driveway. We’ve arrived.”

Mr. Poe pulled the car up a steep gravel driveway and toward an enormous stone house. The house had a square front door made of dark wood, with several columns marking the front porch. To each side of the door were lights in the shapes of torches, which were brightly lit even though it was morning. Above the front door, the house had rows and rows of square windows, most of which were open to let in the breeze. But in front of the house was what was truly unusual: a vast, well-kept lawn, dotted with long, thin shrubs in remarkable shapes. As Mr. Poe’s car came to a halt, the Baudelaires could see that the shrubs had been trimmed so as to look like snakes. Each hedge was a different kind of serpent, some long, some short, some with their tongues out and some with their mouths open, showing green, fearsome teeth. They were quite eerie, and Violet, Klaus, and Sunny were a bit hesitant about walking beside them on their way up to the house.

Mr. Poe, who led the way, didn’t seem to notice the hedges at all, possibly because he was busy coaching the children on how to behave. “Now, Klaus, don’t ask too many questions right away. Violet, what happened to the ribbon in your hair? I thought you looked very distinguished in it. And somebody please make sure Sunny doesn’t bite Dr. Montgomery. That wouldn’t be a good first impression.”

Mr. Poe stepped up to the door and rang a doorbell that was one of the loudest the children had ever heard. After a moment’s pause, they could hear approaching footsteps, and Violet, Klaus, and Sunny all looked at one another. They had no way of knowing, of course, that very soon there would be more misfortune within their unlucky family, but they nevertheless felt uneasy. *Would Dr. Montgomery be a kind person*? they wondered. *Would he at least be better than Count Olaf? Could he possibly be worse*?

The door creaked open slowly, and the Baudelaire orphans held their breath as they peered into the dark entryway. They saw a dark burgundy carpet that lay on the floor. They saw a stained-glass light fixture that dangled from the ceiling. They saw a large oil painting of two snakes entwined together that hung on the wall. But where was Dr. Montgomery?

“Hello?” Mr. Poe called out. “Hello?”

“Hello hello hello!” a loud voice boomed out, and from behind the door stepped a short, chubby man with a round red face. “I am your Uncle Monty, and this is really perfect timing! I just finished making a coconut cream cake!”

CHAPTER

Two

“*Doesn’t* Sunny like coconut?” Uncle Monty asked. He, Mr. Poe, and the Baudelaire orphans were all sitting around a bright green table, each with a slice of Uncle Monty’s cake. Both the kitchen and the cake were still warm from baking. The cake was a magnificent thing, rich and creamy with the perfect amount of coconut. Violet, Klaus, and Uncle Monty were almost finished with their pieces, but Mr. Poe and Sunny had taken only one small bite each.

“To tell you the truth,” Violet said, “Sunny doesn’t really like anything soft to eat. She prefers very hard food.”

“How unusual for a baby,” Uncle Monty said, “but not at all unusual for many snakes. The Barbary Chewer, for example, is a snake that must have something in its mouth at all times, otherwise it begins to eat its own mouth. Very difficult to keep in captivity. Would Sunny perhaps like a raw carrot? That’s plenty hard.”

“A raw carrot would be perfect, Dr. Montgomery,” Klaus replied.

The children’s new legal guardian got up and walked toward the refrigerator, but then turned around and wagged a finger at Klaus. “None of that ‘Dr. Montgomery’ stuff,” he said. “That’s way too stuffy for me. Call me Uncle Monty! Why, my fellow herpetologists don't even call me Dr. Montgomery."

"What are herpetologists?" Violet asked.

"What do they call you?" Klaus asked.

"Children, children," Mr. Poe said sternly. "Not so many questions."

Uncle Monty smiled at the orphans. "That's quite all right," he said. "Questions show an inquisitive mind. The word 'inquisitive' means—"

"We know what it means," Klaus said. "'Full of questions.'"

"Well, if you know what that means," Uncle Monty said, handing a large carrot to Sunny, "then you should know what herpetology is."

"It's the study of something," Klaus said. "Whenever a word has *ology*, it's the study of something."

"Snakes!" Uncle Monty cried. "Snakes, snakes, snakes! That's what I study! I love Snakes, all kinds, and I circle the globe looking for different kinds to study here in my laboratory! Isn't that interesting?"

"That *is* interesting," Violet said, "*very* interesting. But isn't it dangerous?"

"Not if you know the facts," Uncle Monty said. "Mr. Poe, would you like a raw carrot as well? You've scarcely touched your cake."

Mr. Poe turned red, and coughed into his handkerchief for quite some time before replying, "No, thank you, Dr. Montgomery."

Uncle Monty winked at the children. "If you like, you may call me Uncle Monty as well, Mr. Poe."

"Thank you, Uncle Monty," Mr. Poe said stiffly. "Now, *I* have a question, if you don't mind. You mentioned that you circle the globe. Is there someone who will come and take care of the children while you are out collecting specimens?”

“We’re old enough to stay by ourselves,” Violet said quickly, but inside she was not so sure. Uncle Monty’s line of work did sound interesting, but she wasn’t sure if she was ready to stay alone with her siblings, in a house full of snakes.

“I wouldn’t hear of it,” Uncle Monty said. “You three must come with me. In ten days we leave for Peru, and I want you children right there in the jungle with me.”

“Really?” Klaus said. Behind his glasses, his eyes were shining with excitement. “You’d really take us to Peru with you?”

“I will be glad to have your help,” Uncle Monty said, reaching over to take a bite of Sunny’s piece of cake. “Gustav, my top assistant, left an unexpected letter of resignation for me just yesterday. There’s a man named Stephano whom I have hired to take his place, but he won’t arrive for a week or so, so I am way behind on preparations for the expedition. Somebody has to make sure all the snake traps are working, so I don’t hurt any of our specimens. Somebody has to read up on the terrain of Peru so we can navigate through the jungle without any trouble. And somebody has to slice an enormous length of rope into small, workable pieces.”

“I’m interested in mechanics,” Violet said, licking her fork, “so I would be happy to learn about snake traps.”

“I find guidebooks fascinating,” Klaus said, wiping his mouth with a napkin, “so I would love to read up on Peruvian terrain.”

“Eojip!” Sunny shrieked, taking a bite of carrot. She probably meant something along the lines of “I would be thrilled to bite an enormous length of rope into small, workable pieces!”

“Wonderful!” Uncle Monty cried. “I’m glad you have such enthusiasm. It will make it easier to do without Gustav. It was very strange, his leaving like that. I was unlucky to lose him.” Uncle Monty’s face clouded over, a phrase which here means “took on a slightly gloomy look as Uncle Monty thought about his bad luck,” although if Uncle Monty had known what bad luck was soon to come, he wouldn’t have wasted a moment thinking about Gustav. I wish—and I’m sure you wish as well—that we could go back in time and warn him, but we can’t, and that is that. Uncle Monty seemed to think that was that as well, as he shook his head and smiled, clearing his brain of troubling thoughts. “Well, we’d better get started. No time like the present, I always say. Why don’t you show Mr. Poe to his car, and then I’ll show you to the Reptile Room.”

The three Baudelaire children, who had been so anxious when they had walked through the snake-shaped hedges the first time, raced confidently through them now as they escorted Mr. Poe to his automobile.

“Now, children,” Mr. Poe said, coughing into his handkerchief, “I will be back here in about a week with your luggage and to make sure everything is all right. I know that Dr. Montgomery might seem a bit intimidating to you, but I’m sure in time you will get used to—”

“He doesn’t seem intimidating at all,” Klaus interrupted. “He seems very easy to get along with.”

“I can’t wait to see the Reptile Room,” Violet said excitedly.

“Meeka!” Sunny said, which probably meant “Good-bye, Mr. Poe. Thank you for driving us.”

“Well, good-bye,” Mr. Poe said. “Remember, it is just a short drive here from the city, so please contact me or anyone else at Mulctuary Money Management if you have any trouble. See you soon.” He gave the orphans an awkward little wave with his handkerchief, got into his small car, and drove back down the steep gravel driveway onto Lousy Lane. Violet, Klaus, and Sunny waved back, hoping that Mr. Poe would remember to roll up the car windows so the stench of horseradish would not be too unbearable.

“*Bambini*!” Uncle Monty cried out from the front door. “Come along, bambini!”

The Baudelaire orphans raced back through the hedges to where their new guardian was waiting for them. “*Violet*, Uncle Monty,” Violet said. “My name is Violet, my brother’s is Klaus, and Sunny is our baby sister. None of us is named Bambini.”

“‘Bambini’ is the Italian word for ‘children,’” Uncle Monty explained. “I had a sudden urge to speak a little Italian. I’m so excited to have you three here with me, you’re lucky I’m not speaking gibberish.”

“Have you never had any children of your own?” Violet asked.

“I’m afraid not,” Uncle Monty said. “I always meant to find a wife and start a family, but it just kept slipping my mind. Shall I show you the Reptile Room?”

“Yes, please,” Klaus said.

Uncle Monty led them past the painting of snakes in the entryway into a large room with a grand staircase and very, very high ceilings. “Your rooms will be up there,” Uncle Monty said, gesturing up the stairs. “You can each choose whatever room you like and move the furniture around to suit your taste. I understand that Mr. Poe has to bring your luggage later in that puny car of his, so please make a list of anything you might need and we’ll go into town tomorrow and buy it so you don’t have to spend the next few days in the same underwear.”

“Do we really each get our own room?” Violet asked.

“Of course,” Uncle Monty said. “You don’t think I’d coop you all up in one room when I have this enormous house, do you? What sort of person would do that?”

“Count Olaf did,” Klaus said.

“Oh, that’s right, Mr. Poe told me,” Uncle Monty said, grimacing as if he had just tasted something terrible. “Count Olaf sounds like an awful person. I hope he is torn apart by wild animals someday. Wouldn’t that be satisfying? Oh, well, here we are: the Reptile Room.”

Uncle Monty had reached a very tall wooden door with a large doorknob right in the middle of it. It was so high up that he had to stand on his tiptoes to open it. When it swung open on its creaky hinges, the Baudelaire orphans all gasped in astonishment and delight at the room they saw.

The Reptile Room was made entirely out of glass, with bright, clear glass walls and a high glass ceiling that rose up to a point like the inside of a cathedral. Outside the walls was a bright green field of grasses and shrubs which was of course perfectly visible through the transparent walls, so standing in the Reptile Room was like being inside and outside at the same time. But as remarkable as the room itself was, what was inside the Reptile Room was much more exciting. Reptiles, of course, were lined up in locked metal cages that sat on wooden tables in four neat rows all the way down the room. There were all sorts of snakes, naturally, but there were also lizards, toads, and assorted other animals that the children had never seen before, not even in pictures, or at the zoo. There was a very fat toad with two wings coming out of its back, and a two-headed lizard that had bright yellow stripes on its belly. There was a snake that had three mouths, one on top of the other, and another that seemed to have no mouth at all. There was a lizard that looked like an owl, with wide eyes that gazed at them from the log on which it was perched in its cage, and a toad that looked just like a church, complete with stained-glass eyes. And there was a cage with a white cloth on top of it, so you couldn't see what was inside at all. The children walked down the aisles of cages, peering into each one in amazed silence. Some of the creatures looked friendly, and some of them looked scary, but all of them looked fascinating, and the Baudelaires took a long, careful look at each one, with Klaus holding Sunny up so she could see.

The orphans were so interested in the cages that they didn't even notice what was at the far end of the Reptile Room until they had walked the length of each aisle, but once they reached the far end they gasped in astonishment and delight once more. For here, at the end of the rows and rows of cages, were rows and rows of bookshelves, each one stuffed with books of different sizes and shapes, with a cluster of tables, chairs, and reading lamps in one corner. I'm sure you remember that the Baudelaire children's parents had an enormous collection of books, which the orphans remembered fondly and missed dreadfully, and since the terrible fire, the children were always delighted to meet someone who loved books as much as they did. Violet, Klaus, and Sunny examined the books as carefully as they had the reptile cages, and realized immediately that most of the books were about snakes and other reptiles. It seemed as if every book written on reptiles, from *An Introduction to Large Lizards* to *The Care and Feeding of the Androgynous Cobra*, were lined up on the shelves, and all three children, Klaus especially, looked forward to reading up on the creatures in the Reptile Room.

"This is an amazing place," Violet said finally, breaking the long silence.

"Thank you," Uncle Monty said. "It's taken me a lifetime to put together."

"And are we really allowed to come inside here?" Klaus asked.

"*Allowed*?" Uncle Monty repeated. "Of course not! You are *implored* to come inside here, my boy. Starting first thing tomorrow morning, all of us must be here every day in preparation for the expedition to Peru. I will clear off one of those tables for you, Violet, to work on the traps. Klaus, I expect you to read all of the books about Peru that I have, and make careful notes. And Sunny can sit on the floor and bite rope. We will work all day until suppertime, and after supper we will go to the movies. Are there any objections?"

Violet, Klaus, and Sunny looked at one another and grinned. Any *objections*? The Baudelaire orphans had just been living with Count Olaf, who had made them chop wood and clean up after his drunken guests, while plotting to steal their fortune. Uncle Monty had just described a delightful way to spend one's time, and the children smiled at him eagerly. Of course there would be no objections. Violet, Klaus, and Sunny gazed at the Reptile Room and envisioned an end to their troubles as they lived their lives under Uncle Monty's care. They were wrong, of course, about their misery being over, but for the moment the three siblings were hopeful, excited, and happy.

"No, no, no," Sunny cried out, in apparent answer to Uncle Monty's question.

"Good, good, good," Uncle Monty said, smiling. "Now, let's go figure out whose room is whose."

"Uncle Monty?" Klaus asked shyly. "I just have one question."

"What is that?" Uncle Monty said.

"What's in that cage with the cloth on top of it?"

Uncle Monty looked at the cage, and then at the children. His face lit up with a smile of pure joy. "That, my dears, is a new snake which I brought over from my last journey. Gustav and myself are the only people to have seen it. Next month I will present it to the Herpetological Society as a new discovery, but in the meantime I will allow you to look at it. Gather 'round."

The Baudelaire orphans followed Uncle Monty to the cloth-covered cage, and with a flourish—the word "flourish" here means "a sweeping gesture, often used to show off"—he swooped the cloth off the cage. Inside was a large black snake, as dark as a coal mine and as thick as a sewer pipe, looking right at the orphans with shiny green eyes. With the cloth off its cage, the snake began to uncoil itself and slither around its home.

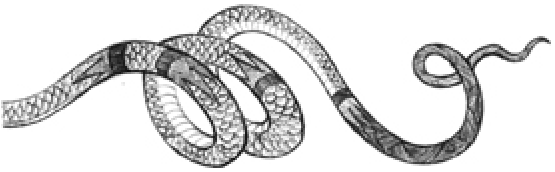
"Because I discovered it," Uncle Monty said, "I got to name it."

"What is it called?" Violet asked.

"The Incredibly Deadly Viper," Uncle Monty replied, and at that moment something happened which I'm sure will interest you. With one flick of its tail, the snake unlatched the door of its cage and slithered out onto the table, and before Uncle Monty or any of the Baudelaire orphans could say anything, it opened its mouth and bit Sunny right on the chin.

CHAPTER

Three



I am very, very sorry to leave you hanging like that, but as I was writing the tale of the Baudelaire orphans, I happened to look at the clock and realized I was running late for a formal dinner party given by a friend of mine, Madame diLustro. Madame diLustro is a good friend, an excellent detective, and a fine cook, but she flies into a rage if you arrive even five minutes later than her invitation states, so you understand that I had to dash off. You must have thought, at the end of the previous chapter, that Sunny was dead and that this was the terrible thing that happened to the Baudelaires at Uncle Monty's house, but I promise you Sunny survives this particular episode. It is Uncle Monty, unfortunately, who will be dead, but not yet.

As the fangs of the Incredibly Deadly Viper closed on Sunny's chin, Violet and Klaus watched in horror as Sunny's little eyes closed and her face grew quiet. Then, moving as suddenly as the snake, Sunny smiled brightly, opened her mouth, and bit the Incredibly Deadly Viper right on its tiny, scaled nose. The snake let go of her chin, and Violet and Klaus could see that it had left barely a mark. The two older Baudelaire siblings looked at Uncle Monty, and Uncle Monty looked back at them and laughed. His loud laughter bounced off the glass walls of the Reptile Room.

"Uncle Monty, what can we do?" Klaus said in despair.

"Oh, I'm sorry, my dears," Uncle Monty said, wiping his eyes with his hands. "You must be very frightened. But the Incredibly Deadly Viper is one of the *least* dangerous and most friendly creatures in the animal kingdom. Sunny has nothing to worry about, and neither do you."

Klaus looked at his baby sister, who was still in his arms, as she playfully gave the Incredibly Deadly Viper a big hug around its thick body, and he realized Uncle Monty must be telling the truth. “But then why is it called the Incredibly Deadly Viper?”

Uncle Monty laughed again. “It’s a misnomer,” he said, using a word which here means “a very wrong name.” “Because I discovered it, I got to name it, remember? Don’t tell anyone about the Incredibly Deadly Viper, because I’m going to present it to the Herpetological Society and give them a good scare before explaining that the snake is completely harmless! Lord knows they’ve teased me many times, because of my name. ‘Hello hello, Montgomery Montgomery,’ they say. ‘How are you how are you, Montgomery Montgomery?’ But at this year’s conference I’m going to get back at them with this prank.” Uncle Monty drew himself up to his full height and began talking in a silly, scientific voice. “‘Colleagues,’ I’ll say, ‘I would like to introduce to you a new species, the Incredibly Deadly Viper, which I found in the southwest forest of—my God! It’s escaped!’ And then, when all my fellow herpetologists have jumped up on chairs and tables and are shrieking in fear, I’ll tell them that the snake wouldn’t hurt a fly! Won’t that be hysterical?”

Violet and Klaus looked at each other, and then began laughing, half in relief that their sister was unharmed, and half with amusement, because they thought Uncle Monty’s prank was a good one.

Klaus put Sunny down on the floor, and the Incredibly Deadly Viper followed, wriggling its tail affectionately around Sunny, the way you might put your arm around someone of whom you were fond.

“Are there any snakes in this room that *are* dangerous?” Violet asked.

“Of course,” Uncle Monty said. “You can’t study snakes for forty years without encountering some dangerous ones. I have a whole cabinet of venom samples from every poisonous snake known to people, so I can study the ways in which these dangerous snakes work. There is a snake in this room whose venom is so deadly that your heart would stop before you even knew he’d bitten you. There is a snake who can open her mouth so wide she could swallow all of us, together, in one gulp. There is a pair of snakes who have learned to drive a car so recklessly that they would run you over in the street and never stop to apologize. But all of these snakes are in cages with much sturdier locks, and all of them can be handled safely when one has studied them enough. I promise that if you take time to learn the facts, no harm will come to you here in the Reptile Room."

There is a type of situation, which occurs all too often and which is occurring at this point in the story of the Baudelaire orphans, called "dramatic irony." Simply put, dramatic irony is when a person makes a harmless remark, and someone else who hears it knows something that makes the remark have a different, and usually unpleasant, meaning. For instance, if you were in a restaurant and said out loud, "I can't wait to eat the veal marsala I ordered," and there were people around who knew that the veal marsala was poisoned and that you would die as soon as you took a bite, your situation would be one of dramatic irony. Dramatic irony is a cruel occurrence, one that is almost always upsetting, and I'm sorry to have it appear in this story, but Violet, Klaus, and Sunny have such unfortunate lives that it was only a matter of time before dramatic irony would rear its ugly head.

As you and I listen to Uncle Monty tell the three Baudelaire orphans that no harm will ever come to them in the Reptile Room, we should be experiencing the strange feeling that accompanies the arrival of dramatic irony. This feeling is not unlike the sinking in one's stomach when one is in an elevator that suddenly goes down, or when you are snug in bed and your closet door suddenly creaks open to reveal the person who has been hiding there. For no matter how safe and happy the three children felt, no matter how comforting Uncle Monty's words were, you and I know that soon Uncle Monty will be dead and the Baudelaires will be miserable once again.

During the week that followed, however, the Baudelaires had a wonderful time in their new home. Each morning, they woke up and dressed in the privacy of their very own rooms, which they had chosen and decorated to their liking. Violet had chosen a room that had an enormous window looking out onto the snake-shaped hedges on the front lawn. She thought such a view might inspire her when she was inventing things. Uncle Monty had allowed her to tack up large pieces of white paper on each wall, so she could sketch out her ideas, even if they came to her in the middle of the night. Klaus had chosen a room with a cozy alcove in it—the word "alcove" here means "a very, very small nook just perfect for sitting and reading." With Uncle Monty's permission, he had carried up a large cushioned chair from the living room and placed it right in the alcove, under a heavy brass reading lamp. Each night, rather than reading in bed, he would curl himself in the chair with a book from Uncle Monty's library, sometimes until morning. Sunny had chosen a room right between Violet's and Klaus's, and filled it with small, hard objects from all over the house, so she could bite them when she felt like it. There were also assorted toys for the Incredibly Deadly Viper so the two of them could play together whenever they wanted, within reason.

But where the Baudelaire orphans most liked to be was the Reptile Room. Each morning, after breakfast, they would join Uncle Monty, who would have already started work on the upcoming expedition. Violet sat at a table with the ropes, gears, and cages that made up the different snake traps, learning how they worked, repairing them if they were broken, and occasionally making improvements to make the traps more comfortable for the snakes on their long journey from Peru to Uncle Monty's house. Klaus sat nearby, reading the books on Peru Uncle Monty had and taking notes on a pad of paper so they could refer to them later. And Sunny sat on the floor, biting a long rope into shorter pieces with great enthusiasm. But what the Baudelaire youngsters liked best was learning all about the reptiles from Uncle Monty. As they worked, he would show them the Alaskan Cow Lizard, a long green creature that produced delicious milk. They met the Dissonant Toad, which could imitate human speech in a gravelly voice. Uncle Monty taught them how to handle the Inky Newt without getting its black dye all over their fingers, and how to tell when the Irascible Python was grumpy and best left alone. He taught them not to give the Green Gimlet Toad too much water, and to never, under any circumstances, let the Virginian Wolfsnake near a typewriter.

While he was telling them about the different reptiles, Uncle Monty would often segue—a word which here means "let the conversation veer off"—to stories from his travels, describing the men, snakes, women, toads, children, and lizards he'd met on his journeys. And before too long, the

Baudelaire orphans were telling Uncle Monty all about their own lives, eventually talking about their parents and how much they missed them. Uncle Monty was as interested in the Baudelaires' stories as they were in his, and sometimes they got to talking so long they scarcely had time to gobble down dinner before cramming themselves into Uncle Monty's tiny jeep and heading to the movies.

One morning, however, when the three children finished their breakfast and went into the Reptile Room, they found not Uncle Monty, but a note from him. The note read as follows:

> *Dear Bambini,*
>
> I have gone into town to buy a few last things we need for the expedition: Peruvian wasp repellent, toothbrushes, canned peaches, and a fireproof canoe. It will take a while to find the peaches, so don't expect me back until dinnertime.
>
> Stephano, Gustav's replacement, will arrive today by taxi. Please make him feel welcome. As you know, it is only two days until the expedition, so please work very hard today.
>
> *Your giddy uncle,*
> Monty

"What does 'giddy' mean?" Violet asked, when they had finished reading the note.

"'Dizzy and excited,'" Klaus said, having learned the word from a collection of poetry he'd read in first grade. "I guess he means excited about Peru. Or maybe he's excited about having a new assistant."

"Or maybe he's excited about us," Violet said.

"Kindal!" Sunny shrieked, which probably meant "Or maybe he's excited about all these things."

“I’m a little giddy myself,” Klaus said. “It’s really fun to live with Uncle Monty.”

“It certainly is,” Violet agreed. “After the fire, I thought I would never be happy again. But our time here has been wonderful.”

“I still miss our parents, though,” Klaus said. “No matter how nice Uncle Monty is, I wish we still lived in our real home.”

“Of course,” Violet said quickly. She paused, and slowly said out loud something she had been thinking about for the past few days. “I think we’ll always miss our parents. But I think we can miss them without being miserable all the time. After all, they wouldn’t want us to be miserable.”

“Remember that time,” Klaus said wistfully, “when we were bored one rainy afternoon, and all of us painted our toenails bright red?”

“Yes,” Violet said, grinning, “and I spilled some on the yellow chair.”

“Archo!” Sunny said quietly, which probably meant something like “And the stain never really came out.” The Baudelaire orphans smiled at each other and, without a word, began to do the day’s work. For the rest of the morning they worked quietly and steadily, realizing that their contentment here at Uncle Monty’s house did not erase their parents’ death, not at all, but at least it made them feel better after feeling so sad, for so long.

It is unfortunate, of course, that this quiet happy moment was the last one the children would have for quite some time, but there is nothing anyone can do about it now. Just when the Baudelaires were beginning to think about lunch, they heard a car pull up in front of the house and toot its horn. To the children it signaled the arrival of Stephano. To us it should signal the beginning of more misery.

“I expect that’s the new assistant,” Klaus said, looking up from *The Big Peruvian Book of Small Peruvian Snakes*. “I hope he’s as nice as Monty.”

“Me too,” Violet said, opening and shutting a toad trap to make sure it worked smoothly. “It would be unpleasant to travel to Peru with somebody who was boring or mean.”

“Gerja!” Sunny shrieked, which probably meant something like “Well, let’s go find out what Stephano is like!”

The Baudelaires left the Reptile Room and walked out the front door to find a taxi parked next to the snake-shaped hedges. A very tall, thin man with a long beard and no eyebrows over his eyes was getting out of the backseat, carrying a black suitcase with a shiny silver padlock.

“I’m not going to give you a tip,” the bearded man was saying to the driver of the taxi, “because you talk too much. Not everybody wants to hear about your new baby, you know. Oh, hello there. I am Stephano, Dr. Montgomery’s new assistant. How do you do?”

“How do you do?” Violet said, and as she approached him, there was something about his wheezy voice that seemed vaguely familiar.

“How do you do?” Klaus said, and as he looked up at Stephano, there was something about his shiny eyes that seemed quite familiar.

“Hooda!” Sunny shrieked. Stephano wasn’t wearing any socks, and Sunny, crawling on the ground, could see his bare ankle between his pant cuff and his shoe. There on his ankle was something that was most familiar of all.

The Baudelaire orphans all realized the same thing at the same time, and took a step back as you might from a growling dog. This man wasn’t Stephano, no matter what he called himself. The three children looked at Uncle Monty’s new assistant from head to toe and saw that he was none other than Count Olaf. He may have shaved off his one long eyebrow, and grown a beard over his scraggly chin, but there was no way he could hide the tattoo of an eye on his ankle.

CHAPTER

Four

One of the most difficult things to think about in life is one’s regrets. Something will happen to you, and you will do the wrong thing, and for years afterward you will wish you had done something different. For instance, sometimes when I am walking along the seashore, or visiting the grave of a friend, I will remember a day, a long time ago, when I didn’t bring a flashlight with me to a place where I should have brought a flashlight, and the results were disastrous. *Why didn’t I bring a flashlight*? I think to myself, even though it is too late to do anything about it. *I should have brought a flashlight*.

For years after this moment in the lives of the Baudelaire orphans, Klaus thought of the time when he and his siblings realized that Stephano was actually Count Olaf, and was filled with regret that he didn't call out to the driver of the taxicab who was beginning to drive back down the driveway. *Stop*! Klaus would think to himself, even though it was too late to do anything about it. *Stop! Take this man away!* Of course, it is perfectly understandable that Klaus and his sisters were too surprised to act so quickly, but Klaus would lie awake in bed, years later, thinking that maybe, just maybe, if he had acted in time, he could have saved Uncle Monty's life.

But he didn't. As the Baudelaire orphans stared at Count Olaf, the taxi drove back down the driveway and the children were alone with their nemesis, a word which here means "the worst enemy you could imagine." Olaf smiled at them the way Uncle Monty's Mongolian Meansnake would smile when a white mouse was placed in its cage each day for dinner. "Perhaps one of you might carry my suitcase into my room," he suggested in his wheezy voice. "The ride along that smelly road was dull and unpleasant and I am very tired."

"If anyone ever deserved to travel along Lousy Lane," Violet said, glaring at him, "it is you, Count Olaf. We will certainly not help you with your luggage, because we will not let you in this house."

Olaf frowned at the orphans, and then looked this way and that as if he expected to see someone hiding behind the snake-shaped hedges. "Who is Count Olaf?" he asked quizzically. "My name is Stephano. I am here to assist Montgomery Montgomery with his upcoming expedition to Peru. I assume you three are midgets who work as servants in the Montgomery home."

"We are not midgets," Klaus said sternly. "We are children. And you are not Stephano. You are Count Olaf. You may have grown a beard and shaved your eyebrow, but you are still the same despicable person and we will not let you in this house."

"Futa!" Sunny shrieked, which probably meant something like "I agree!"

Count Olaf looked at each of the Baudelaire orphans, his eyes shining brightly as if he were telling a joke. “I don’t know what you’re talking about,” he said, “but if I did, and I were this Count Olaf you speak of, I would think that you were being very rude. And if I thought you were rude, I might get angry. And if I got angry, who knows what I would do?”

The children watched as Count Olaf raised his scrawny arms in a sort of shrug. It probably isn’t necessary to remind you just how violent he could be, but it certainly wasn’t necessary at all to remind the Baudelaires. Klaus could still feel the bruise on his face from the time Count Olaf had struck him, when they were living in his house. Sunny still ached from being stuffed into a birdcage and dangled from the tower where he made his evil plans. And while Violet had not been the victim of any physical violence from this terrible man, she had almost been forced to marry him, and that was enough to make her pick up his suitcase and drag it slowly toward the door to the house.

“Higher,” Olaf said. “Lift it higher. I don’t want it dragged along the ground like that.”

Klaus and Sunny hurried to help Violet with the suitcase, but even with the three of them carrying it the weight made them stagger. It was misery enough that Count Olaf had reappeared in their lives, just when they were feeling so comfortable and safe with Uncle Monty. But to actually be helping this awful person enter their home was almost more than they could bear. Olaf followed closely behind them and the three children could smell his stale breath as they brought the suitcase indoors and set it on the carpet beneath the painting of the entwined snakes.

“Thank you, orphans,” Olaf said, shutting the front door behind him. “Now, Dr. Montgomery said my room would be waiting upstairs. I suppose I can carry my luggage from here. Now run along. We’ll have lots of time to get to know one another later.”

“We already know you, Count Olaf,” Violet said. “You obviously haven’t changed a bit.”

“You haven’t changed, either,” Olaf said. “It is clear to me, Violet, that you are as stubborn as ever. And Klaus, you are still wearing those idiotic glasses from reading too many books. And I see that little Sunny here still has nine toes instead of ten.”

“Fut!” Sunny shrieked, which probably meant something like “I do not!”

“What are you talking about?” Klaus said impatiently. “She has ten toes, just like everybody else.”

“Really?” Olaf said. “That’s odd. I remember that she lost one of her toes in an accident.” His eyes shone even brighter, as if he were telling a joke, and he reached into the pocket of his shabby coat and brought out a long knife, such as one might use for slicing bread. “I seem to recall there was a man who was so confused by being called repeatedly by the wrong name that he accidentally dropped a knife on her little foot and severed one of her toes.”

Violet and Klaus looked at Count Olaf, and then at the bare foot of their little sister. “You wouldn’t dare,” Klaus said.

“Let’s not discuss what I would or would not dare to do,” Olaf said. “Let us discuss, rather, what I am to be called for as long as we are together in this house.”

“We’ll call you Stephano, if you insist on threatening us,” Violet said, “but we won’t be together in this house for long.”

Stephano opened his mouth to say something, but Violet was not interested in continuing the conversation. She turned on her heel and marched primly through the enormous door of the Reptile Room, followed by her siblings. If you or I had been there, we would have thought that the Baudelaire orphans weren’t scared at all, speaking so bravely like that to Stephano and then simply walking away, but once the children reached the far end of the room, their true emotions showed clearly on their faces. The Baudelaires were terrified. Violet put her hands over her face and leaned against one of the reptile cages. Klaus sank into a chair, trembling so hard that his feet rattled against the marble floor. And Sunny curled up into a little ball on the floor, so tiny you might have missed her if you walked into the room. For several moments, none of the children spoke, just listened to the muffled sounds of Stephano walking up the stairs and their own heartbeats pounding in their ears.

“How did he find us?” Klaus asked. His voice was a hoarse whisper, as if he had a sore throat. “How did he get to be Uncle Monty’s assistant? What is he doing here?”

“He vowed that he’d get his hands on the Baudelaire fortune,” Violet said, taking her hands away from her face and picking up Sunny, who was shivering. “That was the last thing he said to me before he escaped. He said he’d get our fortune if it was the last thing he ever did.” Violet shuddered, and did not add that he’d also said that once he got their fortune, he’d do away with all three of the Baudelaire siblings. She did not need to add it. Violet, Klaus, and Sunny all knew that if he figured out a way to seize their fortune, he would slit the throats of the Baudelaire orphans as easily as you or I might eat a small butter cookie.

“What can we do?” Klaus asked. “Uncle Monty won’t be back for hours.”

“Maybe we can call Mr. Poe,” Violet said. “It’s the middle of business hours, but maybe he could leave the bank for an emergency.”

“He wouldn’t believe us,” Klaus said. “Remember when we tried to tell him about Count Olaf when we lived there? He took such a long time to realize the truth, it was almost too late. I think we should run away. If we leave right now, we could probably get to town in time to catch a train far away from here.”

Violet pictured the three of them, all alone, walking along Lousy Lane beneath the sour apple trees, with the bitter smell of horseradish encircling them. “Where would we go?” she asked.

“Anywhere,” Klaus said. “Anywhere but here. We could go far away where Count Olaf wouldn’t find us, and change our names so no one would know who we were."

"We haven't any money," Violet pointed out. "How could we live by ourselves?"

"We could get jobs," Klaus replied. "I could work in a library, maybe, and you could work in some sort of mechanical factory. Sunny probably couldn't get a job at her age, but in a few years she could."

The three orphans were quiet. They tried to picture leaving Uncle Monty and living by themselves, trying to find jobs and take care of each other. It was a very lonely prospect. The Baudelaire children sat in sad silence awhile, and they were each thinking the same thing: They wished that their parents had never been killed in the fire, and that their lives had never been turned topsy-turvy the way they had. If only the Baudelaire parents were still alive, the youngsters wouldn't even have heard of Count Olaf, let alone have him settling into their home and undoubtedly making evil plans.

"We can't leave," Violet said finally. "Count Olaf found us once, and I'm sure he'd find us again, no matter how far we went. Plus, who knows where Count Olaf's assistants are? Perhaps they've surrounded the house right now, keeping watch in case we're on to him."

Klaus shivered. He hadn't been thinking of Olaf's assistants. Besides scheming to get his hands on the Baudelaire fortune, Olaf was the leader of a terrible theater troupe, and his fellow actors were always ready to help him with his plans. They were a gruesome crew, each more terrifying than the next. There was a bald man with a long nose, who always wore a black robe. There were two women who always had ghostly white powder on their faces. There was a person so large and blank-looking that you couldn't tell if it was a man or a woman. And there was a skinny man with two hooks where his hands should have been. Violet was right. Any of these people could be lurking outside Uncle Monty's house, waiting to catch them if they tried to escape.

"I think we should just wait for Uncle Monty to come back, and tell him what has happened," Violet said. "He'll believe us. If we tell him about the tattoo, he'll at least ask *Stephano* for an explanation." Violet's tone of voice when she said "Stephano" indicated her utter scorn for Olaf's disguise.

"Are you sure?" Klaus said. "After all, Uncle Monty is the one who hired *Stephano*." Klaus's tone of voice when *he* said "Stephano" indicated that he shared his sister's feelings. "For all we know, Uncle Monty and Stephano have planned something together."

"Minda!" Sunny shrieked, which probably meant something like "Don't be ridiculous, Klaus!"

Violet shook her head. "Sunny's right. I can't believe that Uncle Monty would be in cahoots with Olaf. He's been so kind and generous to us, and besides, if they were working together, Olaf wouldn't insist on using a different name."

"That's true," Klaus said thoughtfully. "So we wait for Uncle Monty."

"We wait," Violet agreed.

"Tojoo," Sunny said solemnly, and the siblings looked at one another glumly. Waiting is one of life's hardships. It is hard enough to wait for chocolate cream pie while burnt roast beef is still on your plate. It is plenty difficult to wait for Halloween when the tedious month of September is still ahead of you. But to wait for one's adopted uncle to come home while a greedy and violent man is upstairs was one of the worst waits the Baudelaires had ever experienced. To get their mind off it, they tried to continue with their work, but the children were too anxious to get anything done. Violet tried to fix a hinged door on one of the traps, but all she could concentrate on was the knot of worry in her stomach. Klaus tried to read about protecting oneself from thorny Peruvian plants, but thoughts of Stephano kept clouding his brain. And Sunny tried to bite rope, but she had a cold chill of fear running through her teeth and she soon gave up. She didn't even feel like playing with the Incredibly Deadly Viper. So the Baudelaires spent the rest of the afternoon sitting silently in the Reptile Room, looking out the window for Uncle Monty's jeep and listening to the occasional noise from upstairs. They didn't even want to think about what Stephano might be unpacking.

Finally, as the snake-shaped hedges began to cast long, skinny shadows in the setting sun, the three children heard an approaching engine, and the jeep pulled up. A large canoe was strapped to the roof of the jeep, and the backseat was piled with Monty's purchases. Uncle Monty got out, struggling under the weight of several shopping bags, and saw the children through the glass walls of the Reptile Room. He smiled at them. They smiled back, and in that instant when they smiled was created another moment of regret for them. Had they not paused to smile at Monty but instead gone dashing out to the car, they might have had a brief moment alone with him. But by the time they reached the entry hall, he was already talking to Stephano.

"I didn't know what kind of toothbrush you preferred," Uncle Monty was saying apologetically, "so I got you one with extra-firm bristles because that's the kind I like. Peruvian food tends to be sticky, so you need to have at least one extra toothbrush whenever you go there."

"Extra-firm bristles are fine with me," Stephano said, speaking to Uncle Monty but looking at the orphans with his shiny, shiny eyes. "Shall I carry in the canoe?"

"Yes, but my goodness, you can't carry it all by yourself," Uncle Monty said. "Klaus, please help Stephano, will you?"

"Uncle Monty," Violet said, "we have something very important to tell you."

"I'm all ears," Uncle Monty said, "but first let me show you the wasp repellent I picked up. I'm so glad Klaus read up on the insect situation in Peru, because the other repellents I have would have been no use at all." Uncle Monty rooted through one of the bags on his arm as the children waited impatiently for him to finish. "This one contains a chemical called —"

"Uncle Monty," Klaus said, "what we have to tell you really can't wait."

"Klaus," Uncle Monty said, his eyebrows rising in surprise, "it's not polite to interrupt when your uncle is talking. Now, please help Stephano with the canoe, and we'll talk about anything you want in a few moments."

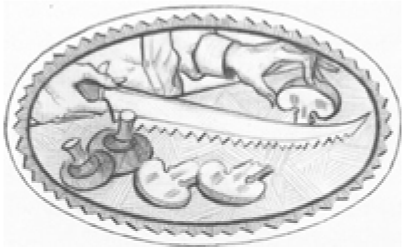
Klaus sighed, but followed Stephano out the open door. Violet watched them walking toward the jeep as Uncle Monty put down the shopping bags and faced her. "I can't remember what I was saying about the repellent," he said, a little crossly. "I hate losing my train of thought."

"What we have to tell you," Violet began, but she stopped when something caught her eye. Monty was facing away from the door, so he couldn't see what Stephano was doing, but Violet saw Stephano stop at the snake-shaped hedges, reach into his coat pocket, and take out the long knife. Its blade caught the light of the setting sun and it glowed brightly, like a lighthouse. As you probably know, lighthouses serve as warning signals, telling ships where the shore is so they don't run into it. The shining knife was a warning, too.

Klaus looked at the knife, and then at Stephano, and then at Violet. Violet looked at Klaus, and then at Stephano, and then at Monty. Sunny looked at everyone. Only Monty didn't notice what was going on, so intent was he on remembering whatever he was babbling about wasp repellent. "What we have to tell you," Violet began again, but she couldn't continue. Stephano didn't say a word. He didn't have to. Violet knew that if she breathed one word about his true identity, Stephano would hurt her brother, right there at the snake-shaped hedges. Without saying a word, the nemesis of the Baudelaire orphans had sent a very clear warning.

CHAPTER

Five



That night felt like the longest and most terrible the Baudelaire orphans had ever had, and they'd had plenty. There was one night, shortly after Sunny was born, that all three children had a horrible flu, and tossed and turned in the grasp of a terrible fever, while their father tried to soothe them all at once, placing cold washcloths on their sweaty brows. The night after their parents had been killed, the three children had stayed at Mr. Poe's house, and had stayed up all night, too miserable and confused to even try to sleep. And of course, they had spent many a long and terrible night while living with Count Olaf.

But this particular night seemed worse. From the moment of Monty's arrival until bedtime, Stephano kept the children under his constant surveillance, a phrase which here means "kept watching them so they couldn't possibly talk to Uncle Monty alone and reveal that he was really Count Olaf," and Uncle Monty was too preoccupied to think that anything unusual was going on. When they brought in the rest of Uncle Monty's purchases, Stephano carried bags with only one hand, keeping the other one in his coat pocket where the long knife was hidden, but Uncle Monty was too excited about all the new supplies to ask about it. When they went into the kitchen to prepare dinner, Stephano smiled menacingly at the children as he sliced mushrooms, but Uncle Monty was too busy making sure the stroganoff sauce didn't boil to even notice that Stephano was using his own threatening knife for the chopping. Over dinner, Stephano told funny stories and praised Monty's scientific work, and Uncle Monty was so flattered he didn't even think to guess that Stephano was holding a knife under the table, rubbing the blade gently against Violet's knee for the entire meal.

And when Uncle Monty announced that he would spend the evening showing his new assistant around the Reptile Room, he was too eager to realize that the Baudelaires simply went up to bed without a word.

For the first time, having individual bedrooms seemed like a hardship rather than a luxury, for without one another's company the orphans felt even more lonely and helpless. Violet stared at the paper tacked to her wall and tried to imagine what Stephano was planning. Klaus sat in his large cushioned chair and turned on his brass reading lamp but was too worried to even open a book. Sunny stared at her hard objects but didn't bite a single one of them.

All three children thought of walking down the hall to Uncle Monty's room and waking him up to tell him what was wrong. But to get to his bedroom, they would have to walk past the room in which Stephano was staying, and all night long Stephano kept watch in a chair placed in front of his open door. When the orphans opened their doors to peer down the dark hallway, they saw Stephano's pale, shaved head, which seemed to be floating above his body in the darkness. And they could see his knife, which Stephano was moving slowly like the pendulum of a grandfather clock. Back and forth it went, back and forth, glinting in the dim light, and the sight was so fearsome they didn't dare try walking down the hallway.

Finally, the light in the house turned the pale blue-gray of early dawn, and the Baudelaire children walked blearily down the stairs to breakfast, tired and achy from their sleepless night. They sat around the table where they had eaten cake on their first morning at the house, and picked listlessly at their food. For the first time since their arrival at Uncle Monty's, they were not eager to enter the Reptile Room and begin the day's work.

"I suppose we have to go in now," Violet said finally, putting aside her scarcely nibbled toast. "I'm sure Uncle Monty has already started working, and is expecting us."

"And I'm sure that Stephano is there, too," Klaus said, staring glumly into his cereal bowl. "We'll never get a chance to tell Uncle Monty what we know about him."

“Yinga,” Sunny said sadly, dropping her untouched raw carrot to the floor.

“If only Uncle Monty knew what we know,” Violet said, “and Stephano knew that he knew what we know. But Uncle Monty doesn’t know what we know, and Stephano knows that he doesn’t know what we know.”

“I know,” Klaus said.

“I know you know,” Violet said, “but what we don’t know is what Count Olaf—I mean *Stephano*—is really up to. He’s after our fortune, certainly, but how can he get it if we’re under Uncle Monty’s care?”

“Maybe he’s just going to wait until you’re of age, and then steal the fortune,” Klaus said.

“Four years is a long time to wait,” Violet said. The three orphans were quiet, as each remembered where they had been four years ago. Violet had been ten, and had worn her hair very short. She remembered that sometime around her tenth birthday she had invented a new kind of pencil sharpener. Klaus had been about eight, and he remembered how interested he had been in comets, reading all the astronomy books his parents had in their library. Sunny, of course, had not been born four years ago, and she sat and tried to remember what that was like. Very dark, she thought, with nothing to bite. For all three youngsters, four years did seem like a very long time.

“Come on, come on, you are moving very slowly this morning,” Uncle Monty said, bursting into the room. His face seemed even brighter than usual, and he was holding a small bunch of folded papers in one hand. “Stephano has only worked here one day, and he’s already in the Reptile Room. In fact, he was up before I was—I ran into him on my way down the stairs. He’s an eager beaver. But you three—you’re moving like the Hungarian Sloth Snake, whose top speed is half an inch per hour! We have lots to do today, and I’d like to catch the six o’clock showing of *Zombies in the Snow* tonight, so let’s try to hurry, hurry, hurry.”

Violet looked at Uncle Monty, and realized that this might be their only opportunity to talk to him alone, without Stephano around, but he seemed so wound up they weren't sure if he would listen to them. "Speaking of Stephano," she said timidly, "we'd like to talk to you about him."

Uncle Monty's eyes widened, and he looked around him as if there were spies in the room before leaning in to whisper to the children. "I'd like to talk to you, too," he said. "I have my suspicions about Stephano, and I'd like to discuss them with you."

The Baudelaire orphans looked at one another in relief. "You do?" Klaus said.

"Of course," Uncle Monty said. "Last night I began to get very suspicious about this new assistant of mine. There's something a little spooky about him, and I—" Uncle Monty looked around again, and began speaking even softer, so the children had to hold their breaths to hear him. "And I think we should discuss it outside. Shall we?"

The children nodded in agreement, and rose from the table. Leaving their dirty breakfast dishes behind, which is not a good thing to do in general but perfectly acceptable in the face of an emergency, they walked with Uncle Monty to the front entryway, past the painting of two snakes entwined together, out the front door, and onto the lawn, as if they wanted to talk to the snake-shaped hedges instead of to one another.

"I don't mean to be vainglorious," Uncle Monty began, using a word which here means "braggy," "but I really am one of the most widely respected herpetologists in the world."

Klaus blinked. It was an unexpected beginning for the conversation. "Of course you are," he said, "but—"

"And because of this, I'm sad to say," Uncle Monty continued, as if he had not heard, "many people are jealous of me."

"I'm sure that's true," Violet said, puzzled.

"And when people are jealous," Uncle Monty said, shaking his head, "they will do anything. They will do crazy things. When I was getting my herpetology degree, my roommate was so envious of a new toad I had discovered that he stole and ate my only specimen. I had to X-ray his stomach, and use the X-rays rather than the toad in my presentation. And something tells me we may have a similar situation here.”

What was Uncle Monty talking about?

“I’m afraid I don’t quite follow you,” Klaus said, which is the polite way of saying “What are you talking about, Uncle Monty?”

“Last night, after you went to bed, Stephano asked me a few too many questions about all the snakes and about my upcoming expedition. And do you know why?”

“I think so,” Violet began, but Uncle Monty interrupted her.

“It is because this man who is calling himself Stephano,” he said, “is really a member of the Herpetological Society, and he is here to try and find the Incredibly Deadly Viper so he can preempt my presentation. Do you three know what the word ‘preempt’ means?”

“No,” Violet said, “but—”

“It means that I think this Stephano is going to steal my snake,” Uncle Monty said, “and present it to the Herpetological Society. Because it is a new species, there’s no way I can prove I discovered it. Before we know it, the Incredibly Deadly Viper will be called the Stephano Snake, or something dreadful like that. And if he’s planning that, just think what he will do to our Peruvian expedition. Each toad we catch, each venom sample we put into a test tube, each snake interview we record—every scrap of work we do—will fall into the hands of this Herpetological Society spy.”

“He’s not a Herpetological Society spy,” Klaus said impatiently, “he’s Count Olaf!”

“I know just what you mean!” Uncle Monty said excitedly. “This sort of behavior is indeed as dastardly as that terrible man’s. That is why I’m doing this.” He raised one hand and waved the folded papers in the air. “As you know," he said, "tomorrow we are leaving for Peru. These are our tickets for the five o'clock voyage on the *Prospero*, a fine ship that will take us across the sea to South America. There's a ticket for me, one for Violet, one for Klaus, one for Stephano, but not one for Sunny because we're going to hide her in a suitcase to save money."

"Deepo!"

"I'm kidding about that. But I'm not kidding about this." Uncle Monty, his face flushed with excitement, took one of the folded papers and began ripping it into tiny pieces. "This is Stephano's ticket. He's not going to Peru with us after all. Tomorrow morning, I'm going to tell him that he needs to stay here and look after my specimens instead. That way we can run a successful expedition in peace."

"But Uncle Monty—" Klaus said.

"How many times must I remind you it's not polite to interrupt?" Uncle Monty interrupted, shaking his head. "In any case, I know what you're worried about. You're worried what will happen if he stays here alone with the Incredibly Deadly Viper. But don't worry. The Viper will join us on the expedition, traveling in one of our snake carrying cases. I don't know why you're looking so glum, Sunny. I thought you'd be happy to have the Viper's company. So don't look so worried, bambini. As you can see, your Uncle Monty has the situation in hand."

When somebody is a little bit wrong—say, when a waiter puts nonfat milk in your espresso macchiato, instead of lowfat milk—it is often quite easy to explain to them how and why they are wrong. But if somebody is surpassingly wrong—say, when a waiter bites your nose instead of taking your order—you can often be so surprised that you are unable to say anything at all. Paralyzed by how wrong the waiter is, your mouth would hang slightly open and your eyes would blink over and over, but you would be unable to say a word. This is what the Baudelaire children did. Uncle Monty was so wrong about Stephano, in thinking he was a herpetological spy rather than Count Olaf, that the three siblings could scarcely think of a way to tell him so.

“Come now, my dears,” Uncle Monty said. “We’ve wasted enough of the morning on talk. We have to—*ow*!” He interrupted himself with a cry of surprise and pain, and fell to the ground.

“Uncle Monty!” Klaus cried. The Baudelaire children saw that a large, shiny object was on top of him, and realized a moment later what the object was: it was the heavy brass reading lamp, the one standing next to the large cushioned chair in Klaus’s room.

“*Ow*!” Uncle Monty said again, pulling the lamp off him. “That really hurt. My shoulder may be sprained. It’s a good thing it didn’t land on my head, or it really could have done some damage.”

“But where did it come from?” Violet asked.

“It must have fallen from the window,” Uncle Monty said, pointing up to where Klaus’s room was. “Whose room is that? Klaus, I believe it is yours. You must be more careful. You can’t dangle heavy objects out the window like that. Look what almost happened.”

“But that lamp wasn’t anywhere near my window,” Klaus said. “I keep it in the alcove, so I can read in that large chair.”

“Really, Klaus,” Uncle Monty said, standing up and handing him the lamp. “Do you honestly expect me to believe that the lamp danced over to the window and leaped onto my shoulder? Please put this back in your room, in a safe place, and we’ll say no more about it.”

“But—” Klaus said, but his older sister interrupted him.

“I’ll help you, Klaus,” Violet said. “We’ll find a place for it where it’s safe.”

“Well, don’t be too long,” Uncle Monty said, rubbing his shoulder. “We’ll see you in the Reptile Room. Come, Sunny.”

Walking through the entry hall, the four parted ways at the stairs, with Uncle Monty and Sunny going to the enormous door of the Reptile Room, and Violet and Klaus carrying the heavy brass lamp up to Klaus's room.

"You know *very well*," Klaus hissed to his sister, "that I was *not careless* with this lamp."

"Of course I know that," Violet whispered. "But there's no use trying to explain that to Uncle Monty. He thinks Stephano is a herpetological spy. You know as well as I do that Stephano was responsible for this."

"How clever of you to figure that out," said a voice at the top of the stairs, and Violet and Klaus were so surprised they almost dropped the lamp. It was Stephano, or, if you prefer, it was Count Olaf. It was the bad guy. "But then, you've always been clever children," he continued. "A little too clever for my taste, but you won't be around for long, so I'm not troubled by it."

"You're not very clever yourself," Klaus said fiercely. "This heavy brass lamp almost hit us, but if anything happens to my sisters or me, you'll never get your hands on the Baudelaire fortune."

"Dear me, dear me," Stephano said, his grimy teeth showing as he smiled. "If I wanted to harm *you*, orphan, your blood would already be pouring down these stairs like a waterfall. No, I'm not going to harm a hair on any Baudelaire head—not here in this house. You needn't be afraid of me, little ones, until we find ourselves in a location where crimes are more difficult to trace."

"And where would that be?" Violet asked. "We plan to stay right here until we grow up."

"Really?" Stephano said, in that sneaky, sneaky voice. "Why, I had the impression we were leaving the country tomorrow."

"Uncle Monty tore up your ticket," Klaus replied triumphantly. "He was suspicious of you, so he changed his plans and now you're not going with us."

Stephano’s smile turned into a scowl, and his stained teeth seemed to grow bigger. His eyes grew so shiny that it hurt Violet and Klaus to look at them. “I wouldn’t rely on that,” he said, in a terrible, terrible voice. “Even the best plans can change if there’s an accident.” He pointed one spiky finger at the brass reading lamp. “And accidents happen all the time.”

CHAPTER

Six

Bad circumstances have a way of ruining things that would otherwise be pleasant. So it was with the Baudelaire orphans and the movie *Zombies in the Snow*. All afternoon, the three children had sat and worried in the Reptile Room, under the mocking stare of Stephano and the oblivious—the word “oblivious” here means “not aware that Stephano was really Count Olaf and thus being in a great deal of danger”—chatter of Uncle Monty. So by the time it was evening, the siblings were in no mood for cinematic entertainment. Uncle Monty’s jeep was really too small to hold him, Stephano, and the three orphans, so Klaus and Violet shared a seat, and poor Sunny had to sit on Stephano’s filthy lap, but the Baudelaires were too preoccupied to even notice their discomfort.

The children sat all in a row at the multiplex, with Uncle Monty to one side, while Stephano sat in the middle and hogged the popcorn. But the children were too anxious to eat any snacks, and too busy trying to figure out what Stephano planned to do to enjoy *Zombies in the Snow*, which was a fine film. When the zombies first rose out of the snowbanks surrounding the tiny Alpine fishing village, Violet tried to imagine a way in which Stephano could get aboard the *Prospero* without a ticket and accompany them to Peru. When the town fathers constructed a barrier of sturdy oak, only to have the zombies chomp their way through it, Klaus was concerned with exactly what Stephano had meant when he spoke about accidents. And when Gerta, the little milkmaid, made friends with the zombies and asked them to please stop eating the villagers, Sunny, who was of course scarcely old enough to comprehend the orphans' situation, tried to think up a way to defeat Stephano's plans, whatever they were. In the final scene of the movie, the zombies and villagers celebrated May Day together, but the three Baudelaire orphans were too nervous and afraid to enjoy themselves one bit. On the way home, Uncle Monty tried to talk to the silent, worried children sitting in the back, but they hardly said a word in reply and eventually he fell silent.

When the jeep pulled up to the snake-shaped hedges, the Baudelaire children dashed out and ran to the front door without even saying good night to their puzzled guardian. With heavy hearts they climbed the stairs to their bedrooms, but when they reached their doors they could not bear to part.

"Could we all spend the night in the same room?" Klaus asked Violet timidly. "Last night I felt as if I were in a jail cell, worrying all by myself."

"Me too," Violet admitted. "Since we're not going to sleep, we might as well not sleep in the same place."

"Tikko," Sunny agreed, and followed her siblings into Violet's room. Violet looked around the bedroom and remembered how excited she had been to move into it just a short while ago. Now, the enormous window with the view of the snake-shaped hedges seemed depressing rather than inspiring, and the blank pages tacked to her wall, rather than being convenient, seemed only to remind her of how anxious she was.

"I see you haven't worked much on your inventions," Klaus said gently. "I haven't been reading at all. When Count Olaf is around, it sure puts a damper on the imagination."

"Not always," Violet pointed out. "When we lived with him, you read all about nuptial law to find out about his plan, and I invented a grappling hook to put a stop to it."

“In this situation, though,” Klaus said glumly, “we don’t even know what Count Olaf is up to. How can we formulate a plan if we don’t know *his* plan?”

“Well, let’s try to hash this out,” Violet said, using an expression which here means “talk about something at length until we completely understand it.” “Count Olaf, calling himself Stephano, has come to this house in disguise and is obviously after the Baudelaire fortune.”

“And,” Klaus continued, “once he gets his hands on it, he plans to kill us.”

“Tadu,” Sunny murmured solemnly, which probably meant something along the lines of “It’s a loathsome situation in which we find ourselves.”

“However,” Violet said, “if he harms us, there’s no way he can get to our fortune. That’s why he tried to marry me last time.”

“Thank God that didn’t work,” Klaus said, shivering. “Then Count Olaf would be my brother-in-law. But this time he’s not planning to marry you. He said something about an accident.”

“And about heading to a location where crimes are more difficult to trace,” Violet said, remembering his words. “That must mean Peru. But Stephano isn’t going to Peru. Uncle Monty tore up his ticket.”

“Doog!” Sunny shrieked, in a generic cry of frustration, and pounded her little fist on the floor. The word “generic” here means “when one is unable to think of anything else to say,” and Sunny was not alone in this. Violet and Klaus were of course too old to say things like “Doog!” but they wished they weren’t. They wished they could figure out Count Olaf’s plan. They wished their situation didn’t seem as mysterious and hopeless as it did, and they wished they were young enough to simply shriek “Doog!” and pound their fists on the floor. And most of all, of course, they wished that their parents were alive and that the Baudelaires were all safe in the home where they had been born.

And as fervently as the Baudelaire orphans wished their circumstances were different, I wish that I could somehow change the circumstances of this story for you. Even as I sit here, safe as can be and so very far from Count Olaf, I can scarcely bear to write another word. Perhaps it would be best if you shut this book right now and never read the rest of this horrifying story. You can imagine, if you wish, that an hour later, the Baudelaire orphans suddenly figured out what Stephano was up to and were able to save Uncle Monty's life. You can picture the police arriving with all their flashing lights and sirens, and dragging Stephano away to jail for the rest of his life. You can pretend, even though it is not so, that the Baudelaires are living happily with Uncle Monty to this day. Or best of all, you can conjure up the illusion that the Baudelaire parents have not been killed, and that the terrible fire and Count Olaf and Uncle Monty and all the other unfortunate events are nothing more than a dream, a figment of the imagination.

But this story is not a happy one, and I am not happy to tell you that the Baudelaire orphans sat dumbly in Violet's room—the word "dumbly" here means "without speaking," rather than "in a stupid way"—for the rest of the night. Had someone peeped through the bedroom window as the morning sun rose, they would have seen the three children huddled together on the bed, their eyes wide open and dark with worry. But nobody peeped through the window. Somebody knocked on the door, four loud knocks as if something were being nailed shut.

The children blinked and looked at one another. "Who is it?" Klaus called out, his voice crackly from being silent so long.

Instead of an answer, whoever it was simply turned the knob and the door swung slowly open. There stood Stephano, with his clothes all rumpled and his eyes shining brighter than they ever had before.

"Good morning," he said. "It's time to leave for Peru. There is just room for three orphans and myself in the jeep, so get a move on."

"We told you yesterday that you weren't going," Violet said. She hoped her voice sounded braver than she felt.

“It is your Uncle Monty who isn’t going,” Stephano said, and raised the part of his forehead where his eyebrow should have been.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Klaus said. “Uncle Monty wouldn’t miss this expedition for the world.”

“Ask him,” Stephano said, and the Baudelaires saw a familiar expression on his face. His mouth scarcely moved, but his eyes were shining as if he’d just told a joke. “Why don’t you ask him? He’s down in the Reptile Room.”

“We *will* ask him,” Violet said. “Uncle Monty has no intention of letting you take us to Peru alone.” She rose from the bed, took the hands of her siblings, and walked quickly past Stephano who was smirking in the doorway. “We *will* ask him,” Violet said again, and Stephano gave a little bow as the children walked out of the room.

The hallway was strangely quiet, and blank as the eyes of a skull. “Uncle Monty?” Violet called, at the end of the hallway. Nobody answered.

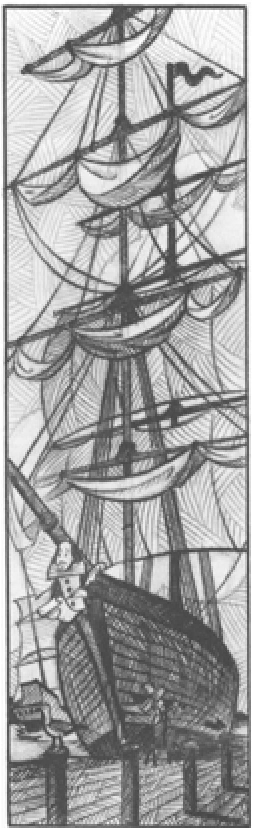
Aside from a few creaks on the steps, the whole house was eerily quiet, as if it had been deserted for many years. “Uncle Monty?” Klaus called, at the bottom of the stairs. They heard nothing.

Standing on tiptoe, Violet opened the enormous door of the Reptile Room and for a moment, the orphans stared into the room as if hypnotized, entranced by the odd blue light which the sunrise made as it shone through the glass ceiling and walls. In the dim glow, they could see only silhouettes of the various reptiles as they moved around in their cages, or slept, curled into shapeless dark masses.

Their footsteps echoing off the glimmering walls, the three siblings walked through the Reptile Room, toward the far end, where Uncle Monty’s library lay waiting for them. Even though the dark room felt mysterious and strange, it was a comforting mystery, and a safe strangeness. They remembered Uncle Monty’s promise: that if they took time to learn the facts, no harm would come to them here in the Reptile Room. However, you and I remember that Uncle Monty’s promise was laden with dramatic irony, and now, here in the early-morning gloom of the Reptile Room, that irony was going to come to fruition, a phrase which here means “the Baudelaires were finally to learn of it.” For just as they reached the books, the three siblings could see a large, shadowy mass huddled in the far corner. Nervously, Klaus switched on one of the reading lamps to get a better look. The shadowy mass was Uncle Monty. His mouth was slightly agape, as if he were surprised, and his eyes were wide open, but he didn’t appear to see them. His face, usually so rosy, was very, very pale, and under his left eye were two small holes, right in a line, the sort of mark made by the two fangs of a snake.

“Divo soom?” Sunny asked, and tugged at his pants leg. Uncle Monty did not move. As he had promised, no harm had come to the Baudelaire orphans in the Reptile Room, but great harm had come to Uncle Monty.

CHAPTER



Seven

"*My*, my, my, my, my," said a voice from behind them, and the Baudelaire orphans turned to find Stephano standing there, the black suitcase with the shiny silver padlock in his hands and a look of brummagem surprise on his face. "Brummagem" is such a rare word for "fake" that even Klaus didn't know what it meant, but the children did not have to be told that Stephano was pretending to be surprised. "What a terrible accident has happened here. Snakebite. Whoever discovers this will be most upset."

"You—" Violet began to say, but her throat fluttered, as if the fact of Uncle Monty's death were food that tasted terrible. "You—" she said again.

Stephano took no notice. “Of course, after they discover that Dr. Montgomery is dead, they’ll wonder what became of those repulsive orphans he had lying around the house. But they’ll be long gone. Speaking of which, it’s time to leave. The *Prospero* sails at five o’clock from Hazy Harbor and I’d like to be the first passenger aboard. That way I’ll have time for a bottle of wine before lunch.”

“How could you?” Klaus whispered hoarsely. He couldn’t take his eyes off Uncle Monty’s pale, pale face. “How could you do this? How could you murder him?”

“Why, Klaus, I’m surprised,” Stephano said, and walked over to Uncle Monty’s body. “A smarty-pants boy like you should be able to figure out that your chubby old uncle died from snakebite, not from murder. Look at those teeth marks. Look at his pale, pale face. Look at these staring eyes.”

“*Stop it*!” Violet said. “*Don’t talk like that*!”

“You’re right!” Stephano said. “There’s no time for chitchat! We have a ship to catch! Let’s move!”

“We’re not going anywhere with you,” Klaus said. His face was pinched with the effort of focusing on their predicament rather than going to pieces. “We will stay here until the police come.”

“And how do you suppose the police will know to come?” Stephano said.

“We will call them,” Klaus said, in what he hoped was a firm tone of voice, and began to walk toward the door.

Stephano dropped his suitcase, the shiny silver padlock making a clattering sound as it hit the marble floor. He took a few steps and blocked Klaus’s way, his eyes wide and red with fury. “I am *so tired*,” Stephano snarled, “of having to *explain* everything to you. You’re supposed to be *so very smart*, and yet you always seem to forget about *this*!” He reached into his pocket and pulled out the jagged knife. “This is my knife. It is very sharp and very eager to hurt you—almost as eager as I am. If you don’t do what I say, you will suffer bodily harm. Is that clear enough for you? Now, get in the damn jeep.”

It is, as you know, very, very rude and usually unnecessary to use profanity, but the Baudelaire orphans were too terrified to point this out to Stephano. Taking a last look at their poor Uncle Monty, the three children followed Stephano to the door of the Reptile Room to get in the damn jeep. To add insult to injury—a phrase which here means “forcing somebody to do an unpleasant task when they’re already very upset”—Stephano forced Violet to carry his suitcase out of the house, but she was too lost in her own thoughts to care. She was remembering the last conversation she and her siblings had had with Uncle Monty, and thinking with a cold rush of shame that it hadn’t really been a conversation at all. You will recall, of course, that on the ride home from seeing *Zombies in the Snow*, the children had been so worried about Stephano that they hadn’t said a word to Uncle Monty, and that when the jeep had arrived at the house, the Baudelaire orphans had dashed upstairs to hash out the situation, without even saying good night to the man who now lay dead under a sheet in the Reptile Room. As the youngsters reached the jeep, Violet tried to remember if they had even thanked him for taking them to the movies, but the night was all a blur. She thought that she, Klaus, and Sunny had probably said “Thank you, Uncle Monty,” when they were standing together at the ticket booth, but she couldn’t be sure. Stephano opened the door of the jeep and gestured with the knife, ushering Klaus and Sunny into the tiny backseat and Violet, the black suitcase heavy on her lap, into the front seat beside him. The orphans had a brief hope that the engine would not start when Stephano turned the key in the ignition, but this was a futile hope. Uncle Monty took good care of his jeep, and it started right up.

Violet, Klaus, and Sunny looked behind them as Stephano began to drive alongside the snake-shaped hedges. At the sight of the Reptile Room, which Uncle Monty had filled so carefully with his specimens and in which he was now a sort of specimen himself, the weight of the Baudelaires’ despair was too much for them and they quietly began to cry. It is a curious thing, the death of a loved one. We all know that our time in this world is limited, and that eventually all of us will end up underneath some sheet, never to wake up. And yet it is always a surprise when it happens to someone we know. It is like walking up the stairs to your bedroom in the dark, and thinking there is one more stair than there is. Your foot falls down, through the air, and there is a sickly moment of dark surprise as you try and readjust the way you thought of things. The Baudelaire orphans were crying not only for their Uncle Monty, but for their own parents, and this dark and curious feeling of falling that accompanies any great loss.

What was to happen to them? Stephano had heartlessly slaughtered the man who was supposed to be watching over the Baudelaires, and now they were all alone. What would Stephano do to them? He was supposed to be left behind when they went to Peru, and now he would be leaving with them on the *Prospero*. And what terrible things would happen in Peru? Would anybody rescue them there? Would Stephano get his hands on the fortune? And what would happen to the three children afterward? These are frightening questions, and if you are thinking about such matters, they require your full attention, and the orphans were so immersed in thinking about them that they didn't realize that Stephano was about to collide with another automobile until the moment of impact.

There was a horrible tearing sound of metal and glass as a black car crashed into Uncle Monty's jeep, throwing the children to the floor with a jarring *thump* that felt as though it left the Baudelaire stomachs up on the seat. The black suitcase lurched into Violet's shoulder and then forward into the windshield, which immediately cracked in a dozen places so it looked like a spiderweb. Stephano gave a cry of surprise and turned the steering wheel this way and that, but the two vehicles were locked together and, with another *thump*, veered off the road into a small pile of mud. It is a rare occurrence when a car accident can be called a stroke of good fortune, but that was most certainly the case here. With the snake-shaped hedges still clearly visible behind them, the Baudelaires' journey toward Hazy Harbor had stopped.

Stephano gave another sharp cry, this one of rage. "Blasted furnaces of hell!" he shouted, as Violet rubbed her shoulder to make sure she wasn't seriously hurt. Klaus and Sunny got up cautiously from the jeep floor and looked out the cracked windshield. There appeared to be only one person in the other car, but it was hard to tell, as that vehicle had clearly suffered much more damage than Monty’s jeep. Its entire front had pleated itself together, like an accordion, and one hubcap was spinning noisily on the pavement of Lousy Lane, making blurry circles as if it were a giant coin somebody had dropped. The driver was dressed in gray and making a rough hacking sound as he opened the crumpled door of the car and struggled his way out. He made the hacking sound again, and then reached into a pocket of his suit and pulled out a white handkerchief.

“It’s Mr. Poe!” Klaus cried.

It *was* Mr. Poe, coughing away as usual, and the children were so delighted to see him that they found themselves smiling despite their horrible circumstances. “Mr. Poe! Mr. Poe!” Violet cried, reaching around Stephano’s suitcase to open the passenger door.

Stephano reached out an arm and grabbed her sore shoulder, turning his head slowly so that each child saw his shiny eyes. “This changes *nothing*!” he hissed at them. “This is a bit of luck for you, but it is your last. The three of you will be back in this car with me and heading toward Hazy Harbor in time to catch the *Prospero*, I promise you.”

“We’ll see about that,” Violet replied, opening the door and sliding out from beneath the suitcase. Klaus opened his door and followed her, carrying Sunny. “Mr. Poe! Mr. Poe!”

“Violet?” Mr. Poe asked. “Violet Baudelaire? Is that you?”

“Yes, Mr. Poe,” Violet said. “It’s all of us, and we’re so grateful you ran into us like this.”

“Well, I wouldn’t say that,” Mr. Poe said. “This was clearly the other driver’s fault. *You* ran into *me*.”

“How dare you!” Stephano shouted, and got out of the car himself, wrinkling his nose at the smell of horseradish that filled the air. He stomped over to where Mr. Poe was standing, but halfway there the children saw his face change from one of pure rage to one of brummagem confusion and sadness. “I’m sorry,” he said, in a high, fluttery voice. “This whole thing is my fault. I’m so distressed by what has happened that I wasn’t paying any attention to the rules of the road. I hope you’re not hurt, Mr. Foe.”

“It’s *Poe*,” Mr. Poe said. “My name is *Poe*. I’m not hurt. Luckily, it looks like nobody was hurt. I wish the same could be said for my car. But who are you and what are you doing with the Baudelaire children?”

“I’ll tell you who he is,” Klaus said. “He’s—”

“Please, Klaus,” Mr. Poe admonished, a word which here means “reprimanded Klaus even though he was interrupting for a very good reason.” “It is not polite to interrupt.”

“My name is Stephano,” Stephano said, shaking Mr. Poe’s hand. “I am—I mean I *was*—Dr. Montgomery’s assistant.”

“What do you mean *was*?” Mr. Poe asked sternly. “Were you fired?”

"No. Dr. Montgomery—oh, excuse me—" Stephano turned away and pretended to dab at his eyes as if he were too sad to continue. Facing away from Mr. Poe, he gave the orphans a big wink before continuing. "I'm sorry to tell you there's been a horrible accident, Mr. Doe. Dr. Montgomery is dead."

"*Poe,*" Mr. Poe said. "He's dead? That's terrible. What has happened?"

"I don't know," Stephano said. "It looks like snakebite to me, but I don't know anything about snakes. That's why I was going into town, to get a doctor. The children seemed too upset to be left alone."

"He's not taking us to get a doctor!" Klaus shouted. "He's taking us to Peru!"

"You see what I mean?" Stephano said to Mr. Poe, patting Klaus's head. "The children are obviously very distressed. Dr. Montgomery was going to take them to Peru today."

"Yes, I know," Mr. Poe said. "That's why I hurried over here this morning, to finally bring them their luggage. Klaus, I know you're confused and upset over this accident, but please try to understand that if Dr. Montgomery is really dead, the expedition is canceled."

"But Mr. Poe—" Klaus said indignantly.

"Please," Mr. Poe said. "This is a matter for adults to discuss, Klaus. Clearly, a doctor needs to be called."

"Well, why don't you drive on up to the house," Stephano said, "and I'll take the children and find a doctor."

"*José*!" Sunny shrieked, which probably meant something like "No way!"

"Why don't we all go to the house," Mr. Poe said, "and *call* for a doctor?"

Stephano blinked, and for a second his face grew angry again before he was able to calm himself and answer smoothly. “Of course,” he said. “I should have called earlier. Obviously I’m not thinking as clearly as you. Here, children, get back in the jeep, and Mr. Poe will follow us.”

“We’re not getting back in that car with you,” Klaus said firmly.

“*Please*, Klaus,” Mr. Poe said. “Try to understand. There’s been a serious accident. All other discussions will have to be put aside. The only trouble is, I’m not sure my car will start. It’s very smashed up.”

“Try the ignition,” Stephano said. Mr. Poe nodded, and walked back to his car. He sat in the driver’s seat and turned the key. The engine made a rough, wet noise—it sounded quite a bit like Mr. Poe’s coughs—but it did not start.

“I’m afraid the engine is quite dead,” Mr. Poe called out.

“And before long,” Stephano muttered to the children, “you will be too.”

“I’m sorry,” Mr. Poe said. “I couldn’t hear you.”

Stephano smiled. “I said, that’s too bad. Well, why don’t I take the orphans back to the house, and you walk behind us? There isn’t room for everyone.”

Mr. Poe frowned. “But the children’s suitcases are here. I don’t want to leave them unattended. Why don’t we put the luggage into your car, and the children and I will walk back to the house?”

Stephano frowned. “Well, one of the children should ride with me, so I won’t get lost.”

Mr. Poe smiled. “But you can see the house from here. You won’t get lost.”

“Stephano doesn’t want us to be alone with you,” Violet said, finally speaking up. She had been waiting for the proper moment to make her case.

"He's afraid that we'll tell you who he really is, and what he's really up to."

"What's she talking about?" Mr. Poe asked Stephano.

"I have no idea, Mr. Toe," Stephano replied, shaking his head and looking at Violet fiercely.

Violet took a deep breath. "This man is not Stephano," she said, pointing at him. "He's Count Olaf, and he's here to take us away."

"Who am I?" Stephano asked. "What am I doing?"

Mr. Poe looked Stephano up and down, and then shook his head. "Forgive the children," he said. "They are very upset. Count Olaf is a terrible man who tried to steal their money, and the youngsters are very frightened of him."

"Do I look like this Count Olaf?" Stephano asked, his eyes shining.

"No, you don't," Mr. Poe said. "Count Olaf had one long eyebrow, and a clean-shaven face. You have a beard, and if you don't mind my saying so, no eyebrows at all."

"He shaved his eyebrow," Violet said, "and grew a beard. Anyone can see that."

"And he has the tattoo!" Klaus cried. "The eye tattoo, on his ankle! Look at the tattoo!"

Mr. Poe looked at Stephano, and shrugged apologetically. "I'm sorry to ask you this," he said, "but the children seem so upset, and before we discuss anything further I'd like to set their minds at ease. Would you mind showing me your ankle?"

"I'd be happy to," Stephano said, giving the children a toothy smile. "Right or left?"

Klaus closed his eyes and thought for a second. "Left," he said.

Stephano placed his left foot on the bumper of Uncle Monty’s jeep. Looking at the Baudelaire orphans with his shiny, shiny eyes, he began to raise the leg of his stained striped pants. Violet, Klaus, Sunny, and Mr. Poe all kept their eyes on Stephano’s ankle.

The pant leg went up, like a curtain rising to begin a play. But there was no tattoo of an eye to be seen. The Baudelaire orphans stared at a patch of smooth skin, as blank and pale as poor Uncle Monty’s face.

CHAPTER

Eight

While the jeep sputtered ahead of them, the Baudelaire orphans trudged back toward Uncle Monty's house, the scent of horseradish in their nostrils and a feeling of frustration in their hearts. It is very unnerving to be proven wrong, particularly when you are really right and the person who is really wrong is the one who is proving you wrong and proving himself, wrongly, right. Right?

"I don't know how he got rid of his tattoo," Klaus said stubbornly to Mr. Poe, who was coughing into his handkerchief, "but that's definitely Count Olaf."

"Klaus," Mr. Poe said, when he had stopped coughing, "this is getting very tiresome, going over this again and again. We have just seen Stephano's unblemished ankle. 'Unblemished' means—"

"We *know* what 'unblemished' means," Klaus said, watching Stephano get out of Uncle Monty's jeep and walk quickly into the house. "'Without tattoos.' But it *is* Count Olaf. Why can't you see it?"

"All I can see," Mr. Poe said, "is what's in front of me. I see a man with no eyebrows, a beard, and no tattoo, and that's not Count Olaf. Anyway, even if by some chance this Stephano wishes you harm, you have nothing to fear. It is quite shocking that Dr. Montgomery has died, but we’re not simply going to hand over you and your fortune to his assistant. Why, this man can’t even remember my name!”

Klaus looked at his siblings and sighed. It would be easier, they realized, to argue with the snake-shaped hedge than with Mr. Poe when he had made up his mind. Violet was about to try reasoning with him one more time when a horn honked behind them. The Baudelaires and Mr. Poe got out of the way of the approaching automobile, a small gray car with a very skinny driver. The car stopped in front of the house and the skinny person got out, a tall man in a white coat.

“May we help you?” Mr. Poe called, as he and the children approached.

“I am Dr. Lucafont,” the tall man said, pointing to himself with a big, solid hand. “I received a call that there’s been a terrible accident involving a snake.”

“You’re here already?” Mr. Poe asked. “But Stephano has scarcely had time to call, let alone for you to drive here.”

“I believe that speed is of the essence in an emergency, don’t you?” Dr. Lucafont said. “If an autopsy is to be performed, it should be done immediately.”

“Of course, of course,” Mr. Poe said quickly. “I was just surprised.”

“Where is the body?” Dr. Lucafont asked, walking toward the door.

“Stephano can tell you,” Mr. Poe said, opening the door of the house. Stephano was waiting in the entryway, holding a coffeepot.

“I’m going to make some coffee,” he said. “Who wants some?”

“I’ll have a cup,” Dr. Lucafont said. “Nothing like a hearty cup of coffee before starting the day’s work.”

Mr. Poe frowned. “Shouldn’t you take a look at Dr. Montgomery first?”

“Yes, Dr. Lucafont,” Stephano said. “Time is of the essence in an emergency, don’t you think?”

“Yes, yes, I suppose you’re right,” Dr. Lucafont said.

“Poor Dr. Montgomery is in the Reptile Room,” Stephano said, gesturing to where the Baudelaires’ guardian still lay. “Please do a thorough examination, and *then* you may have some coffee.”

“You’re the boss,” Dr. Lucafont said, opening the door of the Reptile Room with an oddly stiff hand. Stephano led Mr. Poe into the kitchen, and the Baudelaires glumly followed. When one feels useless and unable to help, one can use the expression “feeling like a fifth wheel,” because if something has four wheels, such as a wagon or a car, there is no real need for a fifth. As Stephano brewed coffee for the adults, the three children sat down at the kitchen table where they had first had coconut cake with Uncle Monty just a short time ago, and Violet, Klaus, and Sunny felt like fifth, sixth, and seventh wheels on a car that was going the wrong direction—toward Hazy Harbor, and the departing *Prospero*.

“When I spoke to Dr. Lucafont on the phone,” Stephano said, “I told him about the accident with your car. When he is done with his medical examination, he will drive you into town to get a mechanic and I will stay here with the orphans.”

“No,” Klaus said firmly. “We are not staying alone with him for an instant.”

Mr. Poe smiled as Stephano poured him a cup of coffee, and looked sternly at Klaus. “Klaus, I realize you are very upset, but it is inexcusable for you to keep treating Stephano so rudely. Please apologize to him at once.”

“*No*!” Klaus cried.

“That’s quite all right, Mr. Yoe,” Stephano said soothingly. “The children are upset over Dr. Montgomery’s murder, so I don’t expect them to be on their best behavior.”

“Murder?” Violet said. She turned to Stephano and tried to look as if she were merely politely curious, instead of enraged. “Why did you say *murder*, Stephano?”

Stephano’s face darkened, and his hands clenched at his sides. It looked like there was nothing he wanted to do more than scratch out Violet’s eyes. “I misspoke,” he said finally.

“Of course he did,” Mr. Poe said, sipping from his cup. “But the children can come with Dr. Lucafont and me if they feel more comfortable that way.”

“I’m not sure they will fit,” Stephano said, his eyes shining. “It’s a very small car. But if the orphans would rather, they could come with me in the jeep and we could follow you and Dr. Lucafont to the mechanic.”

The three orphans looked at one another and thought hard. Their situation seemed like a game, although this game had desperately high stakes. The object of the game was not to end up alone with Stephano, for when they did, he would whisk them away on the *Prospero*. What would happen then, when they were alone in Peru with such a greedy and despicable person, they did not want to think about. What they had to think about was stopping it from happening. It seemed incredible that their very lives hinged on a carpooling conversation, but in life it is often the tiny details that end up being the most important.

“Why don’t we ride with Dr. Lucafont,” Violet said carefully, “and Mr. Poe can ride with Stephano?”

“Whatever for?” Mr. Poe asked.

“I’ve always wanted to see the inside of a doctor’s automobile,” Violet said, knowing that this was a fairly lame invention.

“Oh yes, me too,” Klaus said. “Please, can’t we ride with Dr. Lucafont?”

"I'm afraid not," Dr. Lucafont said from the doorway, surprising everyone. "Not all three of you children, anyway. I have placed Dr. Montgomery's body in my car, which only leaves room for two more passengers."

"Have you completed your examination already?" Mr. Poe asked.

"The preliminary one, yes," Dr. Lucafont said. "I will have to take the body for some further tests, but my autopsy shows that the doctor died of snakebite. Is there any coffee left for me?"

"Of course," Stephano answered, and poured him a cup.

"How can you be sure?" Violet asked the doctor.

"What do you mean?" Dr. Lucafont said quizzically. "I can be sure there's coffee left because I see it right here."

"What I think Violet means," Mr. Poe said, "is how can you be sure that Dr. Montgomery died of snakebite?"

"In his veins, I found the venom of the Mamba du Mal, one of the world's most poisonous snakes."

"Does this mean that there's a poisonous snake loose in this house?" Mr. Poe asked.

"No, no," Dr. Lucafont said. "The Mamba du Mal is safe in its cage. It must have gotten out, bitten Dr. Montgomery, and locked itself up again."

"*What*?" Violet asked. "That's a ridiculous theory. A snake cannot operate a lock by itself."

"Perhaps other snakes helped it," Dr. Lucafont said calmly, sipping his coffee. "Is there anything here to eat? I had to rush over here without my breakfast."

"Your story does seem a little odd," Mr. Poe said. He looked questioningly at Dr. Lucafont, who was opening a cupboard and peering inside.

“Terrible accidents, I have found, are often odd,” he replied.

“It can’t have been an accident,” Violet said. “Uncle Monty is—” She stopped. “Uncle Monty *was* one of the world’s most respected herpetologists. He never would have kept a poisonous snake in a cage it could open itself.”

“If it wasn’t an accident,” Dr. Lucafont said, “then someone would have had to do this on purpose. Obviously, you three children didn’t kill him, and the only other person in the house was Stephano.”

“And I,” Stephano added quickly, “hardly know anything about snakes. I’ve only been working here for two days and scarcely had time to learn anything.”

“It certainly appears to be an accident,” Mr. Poe said. “I’m sorry, children. Dr. Montgomery seemed like an appropriate guardian for you.”

“He was more than that,” Violet said quietly. “He was much, much more than an appropriate guardian.”

“*That’s Uncle Monty’s food*!” Klaus cried out suddenly, his face contorted in anger. He pointed at Dr. Lucafont, who had taken a can out of the cupboard. “*Stop eating his food*!”

“I was only going to have a few peaches,” Dr. Lucafont said. With one of his oddly solid hands, he held up a can of peaches Uncle Monty had bought only yesterday.

“Please,” Mr. Poe said gently to Dr. Lucafont. “The children are very upset. I’m sure you can understand that. Violet, Klaus, Sunny, why don’t you excuse yourselves for a little while? We have much to discuss, and you are obviously too overwrought to participate. Now, Dr. Lucafont, let’s try and figure this out. You have room for three passengers, including Dr. Montgomery’s body. And you, Stephano, have room for three passengers as well.”

“So it’s very simple,” Stephano said. “You and the corpse will go in Dr. Lucafont’s car, and I will drive behind you with the children.”

“*No,*” Klaus said firmly.

“Baudelaires,” Mr. Poe said, just as firmly, “will you three please excuse yourselves?”

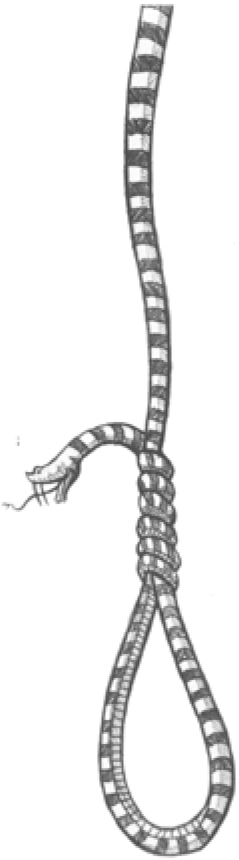
“Afoop!” Sunny shrieked, which probably meant “No.”

“Of course we will,” Violet said, giving Klaus and Sunny a significant look, and taking her siblings’ hands, she half-led them, half-dragged them out of the kitchen. Klaus and Sunny looked up at their older sister, and saw that something about her had changed. Her face looked more determined than grief-stricken, and she walked quickly, as if she were late for something.

You will remember, of course, that even years later, Klaus would lie awake in bed, filled with regret that he didn’t call out to the driver of the taxicab who had brought Stephano into their lives once more. But in this respect Violet was luckier than her brother. For unlike Klaus, who was so surprised when he first recognized Stephano that the moment to act passed him by, Violet realized, as she heard the adults drone on and on, that the time to act was now. I cannot say that Violet, years later, slept easily when she looked back on her life—there were too many miserable times for any of the Baudelaires to be peaceful sleepers—but she was always a bit proud of herself that she realized she and her siblings should in fact excuse themselves from the kitchen and move to a more helpful location.

“What are we doing?” Klaus asked. “Where are we going?” Sunny, too, looked questioningly at her sister, but Violet merely shook her head in answer, and walked faster, toward the door of the Reptile Room.

CHAPTER



Nine

When Violet opened the enormous door of the Reptile Room, the reptiles were still there in their cages, the books were still on their shelves, and the morning sun was still streaming through the glass walls, but the place simply wasn't the same. Even though Dr. Lucafont had removed Uncle Monty's body, the Reptile Room was not as inviting as it used to be, and probably never would be. What happens in a certain place can stain your feelings for that location, just as ink can stain a white sheet. You can wash it, and wash it, and still never forget what has transpired, a word which here means "happened and made everybody sad."

“I don’t want to go in,” Klaus said. “Uncle Monty died in here.”

“I know we don’t want to be here,” Violet said, “but we have work to do.”

“Work?” Klaus asked. “What work?”

Violet gritted her teeth. “We have work to do,” she said, “that Mr. Poe should be doing, but as usual, he is well intentioned but of no real help.” Klaus and Sunny sighed as she spoke out loud a sentiment all three siblings had never said, but always felt, since Mr. Poe had taken over their affairs. “Mr. Poe doesn’t believe that Stephano and Count Olaf are the same person. And he believes that Uncle Monty’s death was an accident. We have to prove him wrong on both counts.”

“But Stephano doesn’t have the tattoo,” Klaus pointed out. “And Dr. Lucafont found the venom of the Mamba du Mal in Monty’s veins.”

“I know, I know,” Violet said impatiently. “The three of us know the truth, but in order to convince the adults, we have to find evidence and proof of Stephano’s plan.”

“If only we’d found evidence and proof earlier,” Klaus said glumly. “Then maybe we could have saved Uncle Monty’s life.”

“We’ll never know about that,” Violet said quietly. She looked around at the Reptile Room, which Monty had worked on his whole life. “But if we put Stephano behind bars for his murder, we’ll at least be able to prevent him from harming anyone else.”

“Including us,” Klaus pointed out.

“Including us,” Violet agreed. “Now, Klaus, find all of Uncle Monty’s books that might contain information about the Mamba du Mal. Let me know when you find anything.”

“But all that research could take days,” Klaus said, looking at Monty’s considerable library.

“Well, we don’t have days,” Violet said firmly. “We don’t even have hours. At five o’clock, the *Prospero* leaves Hazy Harbor, and Stephano is going to do everything he can to make sure we’re on that ship. And if we end up alone in Peru with him—”

“All right, all right,” Klaus said. “Let’s get started. Here, you take this book.”

“I’m not taking any book,” Violet said. “While you’re in the library, I’m going up to Stephano’s room to see if I can find any clues.”

“Alone?” Klaus asked. “In his room?”

“It’ll be perfectly safe,” Violet said, although she knew nothing of the kind. “Get cracking with the books, Klaus. Sunny, watch the door and bite anybody who tries to get in.”

“Ackroid!” Sunny said, which probably meant something like “Roger!”

Violet left, and true to her word, Sunny sat near the door with her teeth bared. Klaus walked to the far end of the room where the library was, carefully avoiding the aisle where the poisonous snakes were kept. He didn’t even want to look at the Mamba du Mal or any other deadly reptile. Even though Klaus knew that Uncle Monty’s death was the fault of Stephano and not really of the snake, he could not bear to look at the reptile who had put an end to the happy times he and his sisters had enjoyed. Klaus sighed, and opened a book, and as at so many other times when the middle Baudelaire child did not want to think about his circumstances, he began to read.

It is now necessary for me to use the rather hackneyed phrase “meanwhile, back at the ranch.” The word “hackneyed” here means “used by so, so many writers that by the time Lemony Snicket uses it, it is a tiresome cliché.” “Meanwhile, back at the ranch” is a phrase used to link what is going on in one part of the story to what is going on in another part of the story, and it has nothing to do with cows or with horses or with any people who work in rural areas where ranches are, or even with ranch dressing, which is creamy and put on salads. Here, the phrase “meanwhile, back at the ranch” refers to what Violet was doing while Klaus and Sunny were in the Reptile Room. For as Klaus began his research in Uncle Monty’s library, and Sunny guarded the door with her sharp teeth, Violet was up to something I am sure will be of interest to you.

Meanwhile, back at the ranch, Violet went to listen at the kitchen door, trying to catch what the adults were saying. As I’m sure you know, the key to good eavesdropping is not getting caught, and Violet moved as quietly as she could, trying not to step on any creaky parts of the floor. When she reached the door of the kitchen, she took her hair ribbon out of her pocket and dropped it on the floor, so if anyone opened the door she could claim that she was kneeling down to pick it up, rather than to eavesdrop. This was a trick she had learned when she was very small, when she would listen at her parents’ bedroom door to hear what they might be planning for her birthday, and like all good tricks, it still worked.

“But Mr. Poe, if Stephano rides with me in my car, and you drive Dr. Montgomery’s jeep,” Dr. Lucafont was saying, “then how will you know the way?”

“I see your point,” Mr. Poe said. “But I don’t think Sunny will be willing to sit on Dr. Montgomery’s lap, if he’s dead. We’ll have to work out another way.”

“I’ve got it,” Stephano said. “I will drive the children in Dr. Lucafont’s car, and Dr. Lucafont can go with you and Dr. Montgomery in Dr. Montgomery’s jeep.”

“I’m afraid that won’t work,” Dr. Lucafont said gravely. “The city laws won’t allow anybody else to drive my car.”

“And we haven’t even discussed the issue of the children’s luggage,” Mr. Poe said.

Violet stood up, having heard enough to know she had enough time to go up to Stephano’s room. Quietly, quietly, Violet walked up the staircase and down the hallway toward Stephano’s door, where he had sat holding the knife that fearsome night. When she reached his door, Violet stopped. It was amazing, she thought, how everything having to do with Count Olaf was frightening. He was such a terrible person that merely the sight of his bedroom door could get her heart pounding. Violet found herself half hoping that Stephano would bound up the stairs and stop her, just so she wouldn't have to open this door and go into the room where he slept. But then Violet thought of her own safety, and the safety of her two siblings. If one's safety is threatened, one often finds courage one didn't know one had, and the eldest Baudelaire found she could be brave enough to open the door. Her shoulder still aching from the car collision, Violet turned the brass handle of the door and walked inside.

The room, as Violet suspected, was a dirty mess. The bed was unmade and had cracker crumbs and bits of hair all over it. Discarded newspapers and mail-order catalogs lay on the floor in untidy piles. On top of the dresser was a small assortment of half-empty wine bottles. The closet door was open, revealing a bunch of rusty wire coathangers that shivered in the drafty room. The curtains over the windows were all bunched up and encrusted with something flaky, and as Violet drew closer she realized with faint horror that Stephano had blown his nose on them.

But although it was disgusting, hardened phlegm was not the sort of evidence Violet was hoping for. The eldest Baudelaire orphan stood in the center of the room and surveyed the sticky disorder of the bedroom. Everything was horrendous, nothing was helpful. Violet rubbed her sore shoulder and remembered when she and her siblings were living with Count Olaf and found themselves locked in his tower room. Although it was frightening to be trapped in his inner sanctum—a phrase which here means "filthy room in which evil plans are devised"—it turned out to be quite useful, because they were able to read up on nuptial law and work their way out of their predicament. But here, in Stephano's inner sanctum at Uncle Monty's house, all Violet could find were signs of uncleanliness. Somewhere Stephano must have left a trail of evidence that Violet could find and use to convince Mr. Poe, but where was it? Disheartened—and afraid she had spent too much time in Stephano's bedroom—Violet went quietly back downstairs.

“No, no, no,” Mr. Poe was saying, when she stopped to listen at the kitchen door again. “Dr. Montgomery can’t drive. He’s dead. There must be a way to do this.”

“I’ve told you over and over,” Stephano said, and Violet could tell that he was growing angry. “The easiest way is for me to take the three children into town, while you follow with Dr. Lucafont and the corpse. What could be simpler?”

“Perhaps you’re right,” Mr. Poe said with a sigh, and Violet hurried into the Reptile Room.

“Klaus, Klaus,” she cried. “Tell me you’ve found something! I went to Stephano’s room but there’s nothing there to help us, and I think Stephano’s going to get us alone in his car.”

Klaus smiled for an answer and began to read out loud from the book he was holding. “‘The Mamba du Mal,’” he read, “‘is one of the deadliest snakes in the hemisphere, noted for its strangulatory grip, used in conjunction with its deadly venom, giving all of its victims a tenebrous hue, which is ghastly to behold.’”

“Strangulatory? Conjunction? Tenebrous? Hue?” Violet repeated. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“I didn’t either,” Klaus admitted, “until I looked up some of the words. ‘Strangulatory’ means ‘having to do with strangling.’ ‘In conjunction’ means ‘together.’ ‘Tenebrous’ means ‘dark.’ And ‘hue’ means ‘color.’ So the Mamba du Mal is noted for strangling people while it bites them, leaving their corpses dark with bruises.”

“Stop! Stop!” Violet cried, covering her ears. “I don’t want to hear any more about what happened to Uncle Monty!”

“You don’t understand,” Klaus said gently. “That *isn’t* what happened to Uncle Monty.”

“But Dr. Lucafont said there was the venom of the Mamba du Mal in Monty’s veins,” she said.

“I’m sure there was,” Klaus said, “but the snake didn’t put it there. If it had, Uncle Monty’s body would have been dark with bruises. But you and I remember that it was as pale as can be.”

Violet started to speak, and then stopped, remembering the pale, pale face of Uncle Monty when they discovered him. “That’s true,” she said. “But then how was he poisoned?”

“Remember how Uncle Monty said he kept the venoms of all his poisonous snakes in test tubes, to study them?” Klaus said. “I think Stephano took the venom and injected it into Uncle Monty.”

“Really?” Violet shuddered. “That’s awful.”

“Okipi!” Sunny shrieked, apparently in agreement.

“When we tell Mr. Poe about this,” Klaus said confidently, “Stephano will be arrested for Uncle Monty’s murder and sent to jail. No longer will he try to whisk us away to Peru, or threaten us with knives, or make us carry his suitcase, or anything like that.”

Violet looked at her brother, her eyes wide with excitement. “Suitcase!” she said. “His suitcase!”

“What are you talking about?” Klaus said quizzically, and Violet was about to explain when there was a knock on the door.

“Come in,” Violet called, signaling to Sunny not to bite Mr. Poe as he walked in.

“I hope you are feeling a bit calmer,” Mr. Poe said, looking at each of the children in turn, “and no longer entertaining the thought that Stephano is Count Olaf.” When Mr. Poe used the word “entertaining” here he meant “thinking,” rather than “singing or dancing or putting on skits.”

“Even if he’s not Count Olaf,” Klaus said carefully, “we think he may be responsible for Uncle Monty’s death.”

“Nonsense!” Mr. Poe exclaimed, as Violet shook her head at her brother. “Uncle Monty’s death was a terrible accident, and nothing more.”

Klaus held up the book he was reading. “But while you were in the kitchen, we were reading about snakes, and—”

“Reading about snakes?” Mr. Poe said. “I should think you’d want to read about anything *but* snakes, after what happened to Dr. Montgomery.”

“But I found out something,” Klaus said, “that—”

“It doesn’t matter what you found out about snakes,” Mr. Poe said, taking out a handkerchief. The Baudelaires waited while he coughed into it before returning it to his pocket. “It doesn’t matter,” he said again, “what you found out about snakes. Stephano doesn’t know anything about snakes. He told us that himself.”

“But—” Klaus said, but he stopped when he saw Violet. She shook her head at him again, just slightly. It was a signal, telling him not to say anything more to Mr. Poe. He looked at his sister, and then at Mr. Poe, and shut his mouth.

Mr. Poe coughed slightly into his handkerchief and looked at his wristwatch. “Now that we have settled that matter, there is the issue of riding in the car. I know that the three of you were eager to see the inside of a doctor’s automobile, but we’ve discussed it over and over and there’s simply no way it can work. You three are going to ride with Stephano into town, while I will ride with Dr. Lucafont and your Uncle Monty. Stephano and Dr. Lucafont are unloading all the bags now and we will leave in a few minutes. If you will excuse me, I have to call the Herpetological Society and tell them the bad news.” Mr. Poe coughed once more into his handkerchief and left the room.

“Why didn’t you want me to tell Mr. Poe what I read?” Klaus asked Violet, when he was sure Mr. Poe was out of earshot, a word which here means “close enough to hear him.” Violet didn’t answer. She was looking through the glass wall of the Reptile Room, watching Dr. Lucafont and Stephano walk past the snake-shaped hedges to Uncle Monty’s jeep. Stephano opened the jeep door, and Dr. Lucafont began to carry suitcases out of the backseat in his strangely stiff hands. “Violet, why didn’t you want me to tell Mr. Poe what I read?”

“When the adults come to fetch us,” Violet said, ignoring Klaus’s question, “keep them in the Reptile Room until I get back.”

“But how will I do that?” Klaus asked.

“Create a distraction,” Violet answered impatiently, still looking out the window at the little pile of suitcases Dr. Lucafont was making.

“What distraction?” Klaus asked anxiously. “How?”

“For goodness’ sake, Klaus,” his older sister replied. “You have read hundreds of books. Surely you must have read something about creating a distraction.”

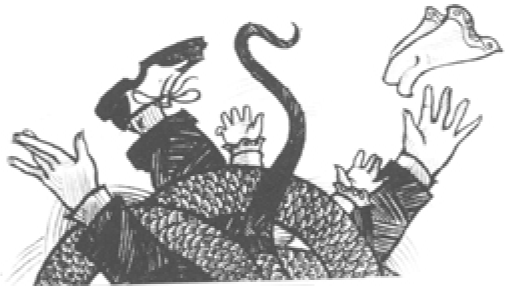
Klaus thought for a second. “In order to win the Trojan War,” he said, “the ancient Greeks hid soldiers inside an enormous wooden horse. That was sort of a distraction. But I don’t have time to build a wooden horse.”

“Then you’ll have to think of something else,” Violet said, and began to walk toward the door, still gazing out the window. Klaus and Sunny looked first at their sister, and then out the window of the Reptile Room in the direction she was looking. It is remarkable that different people will have different thoughts when they look at the same thing. For when the two younger Baudelaires looked at the pile of suitcases, all they thought was that unless they did something quickly, they would end up alone in Uncle Monty’s jeep with Stephano. But from the way Violet was staring as she walked out of the Reptile Room, she was obviously thinking something else. Klaus and Sunny could not imagine what it was, but somehow their sister had reached a different conclusion as she looked at her own brown suitcase, or perhaps the beige one that held Klaus’s things, or the tiny gray one that was Sunny’s, or maybe the large black one, with the shiny silver padlock, that belonged to Stephano.

CHAPTER

Ten

When you were very small, perhaps someone read to you the insipid story—the word “insipid” here means “not worth reading to someone”—of the Boy Who Cried Wolf. A very dull boy, you may remember, cried “Wolf!” when there was no wolf, and the gullible villagers ran to rescue him only to find the whole thing was a joke. Then he cried “Wolf!” when it wasn’t a joke, and the villagers didn’t come running, and the boy was eaten and the story, thank goodness, was over.



The story’s moral, of course, ought to be “Never live somewhere where wolves are running around loose,” but whoever read you the story probably told you that the moral was not to lie. This is an absurd moral, for you and I both know that sometimes not only is it good to lie, it is necessary to lie. For example, it was perfectly appropriate, after Violet left the Reptile Room, for Sunny to crawl over to the cage that held the Incredibly Deadly Viper, unlatch the cage, and begin screaming as loudly as she could even though nothing was really wrong.

There is another story concerning wolves that somebody has probably read to you, which is just as absurd. I am talking about Little Red Riding

Hood, an extremely unpleasant little girl who, like the Boy Who Cried Wolf, insisted on intruding on the territory of dangerous animals. You will recall that the wolf, after being treated very rudely by Little Red Riding Hood, ate the little girl's grandmother and put on her clothing as a disguise. It is this aspect of the story that is the most ridiculous, because one would think that even a girl as dim-witted as Little Red Riding Hood could tell in an instant the difference between her grandmother and a wolf dressed in a nightgown and fuzzy slippers. If you know somebody very well, like your grandmother or your baby sister, you will know when they are real and when they are fake. This is why, as Sunny began to scream, Violet and Klaus could tell immediately that her scream was absolutely fake.

"That scream is absolutely fake," Klaus said to himself, from the other end of the Reptile Room.

"That scream is absolutely fake," Violet said to herself, from the stairs as she went up to her room.

"My Lord! Something is terribly wrong!" Mr. Poe said to himself, from the kitchen where he was talking on the phone. "Good-bye," he said into the receiver, hung up, and ran out of the kitchen to see what the matter was.

"What's the matter?" Mr. Poe asked Stephano and Dr. Lucafont, who had finished unloading the suitcases and were entering the house. "I heard some screams coming from the Reptile Room."

"I'm sure it's nothing," Stephano said.

"You know how children are," Dr. Lucafont said.

"We can't have another tragedy on our hands," Mr. Poe said, and rushed to the enormous door of the Reptile Room. "Children! Children!"

"In here!" Klaus cried. "Come quickly!" His voice was rough and low, and anyone who didn't know Klaus would think he was very frightened. If you *did* know Klaus, however, you would know that when he was very frightened his voice became tense and squeaky, as it did when he discovered Uncle Monty's body. His voice became rough and low when he was trying not to laugh. It is a very good thing that Klaus managed not to laugh as Mr. Poe, Stephano, and Dr. Lucafont came into the Reptile Room. It would have spoiled everything.

Sunny was lying down on the marble floor, her tiny arms and legs waving wildly as if she were trying to swim. Her facial expression was what made Klaus want to chuckle. Sunny's mouth was wide open, showing her four sharp teeth, and her eyes were blinking rapidly. She was trying to appear to be very frightened, and if you didn't know Sunny it would have seemed genuine. But Klaus *did* know Sunny, and knew that when she was very frightened, her face grew all puckered and silent, as it did when Stephano had threatened to cut off one of her toes. To anyone but Klaus, Sunny looked as if she were very frightened, particularly because of who she was with. For wrapped around Sunny's small body was a snake, as dark as a coal mine and as thick as a sewer pipe. It was looking at Sunny with shiny green eyes, and its mouth was open as if it were about to bite her.

"The Incredibly Deadly Viper!" Klaus cried. "It's going to bite her!" Klaus screamed, and Sunny opened her mouth and eyes even wider to seem even more scared. Dr. Lucafont's mouth opened too, and Klaus saw him start to say something, but he was unable to find words. Stephano, who of course could not have cared less about Sunny's well-being, at least looked surprised, but it was Mr. Poe who absolutely panicked.

There are two basic types of panicking: standing still and not saying a word, and leaping all over the place babbling anything that comes into your head. Mr. Poe was the leaping-and-babbling kind. Klaus and Sunny had never seen the banker move so quickly or talk in such a high-pitched voice. "Goodness!" he cried. "Golly! Good God! Blessed Allah! Zeus and Hera! Mary and Joseph! Nathaniel Hawthorne! Don't touch her! Grab her! Move closer! Run away! Don't move! Kill the snake! Leave it alone! Give it some food! Don't let it bite her! Lure the snake away! Here, snakey! Here, snakey snakey!"

The Incredibly Deadly Viper listened patiently to Mr. Poe's speech, never taking its eyes off of Sunny, and when Mr. Poe paused to cough into his handkerchief, it leaned over and bit Sunny on the chin, right where it had bitten her when the two friends had first met. Klaus tried not to grin, but Dr. Lucafont gasped, Stephano stared, and Mr. Poe began leaping and babbling again.

“It’s bitten her!” he cried. “It bit her! It bited her! Calm down! Get moving! Call an ambulance! Call the police! Call a scientist! Call my wife! This is terrible! This is awful! This is ghastly! This is phantasmagorical! This is—”

“This is nothing to worry about,” Stephano interrupted smoothly.

“What do you mean, nothing to worry about?” Mr. Poe asked incredulously. “Sunny was just bitten by—what’s the name of the snake, Klaus?”

“The Incredibly Deadly Viper,” Klaus answered promptly.

“The Incredibly Deadly Viper!” Mr. Poe repeated, pointing to the snake as it held on to Sunny’s chin with its teeth. Sunny gave another fake shriek of fear. “How can you say it’s nothing to worry about?”

“Because the Incredibly Deadly Viper is completely harmless,” Stephano said. “Calm yourself, Poe. The snake’s name is a misnomer that Dr. Montgomery created for his own amusement.”

“Are you sure?” Mr. Poe asked. His voice got a little lower, and he moved a bit more slowly as he began to calm down.

“Of course I’m sure,” Stephano said, and Klaus recognized a look on his face he remembered from living at Count Olaf’s. It was a look of sheer vanity, a word which here means “Count Olaf thinking he’s the most incredible person who ever lived.” When the Baudelaire orphans had been under Olaf’s care, he had often acted this way, always happy to show off his skills, whether he was onstage with his atrocious theater company or up in his tower room making nasty plans. Stephano smiled, and continued to speak to Mr. Poe, eager to show off. “The snake is perfectly harmless—friendly, even. I read up on the Incredibly Deadly Viper, and many other snakes, in the library section of the Reptile Room as well as Dr. Montgomery’s private papers.”

Dr. Lucafont cleared his throat. “Uh, boss—” he said.

“Don’t interrupt me, Dr. Lucafont,” Stephano said. “I studied books on all the major species. I looked carefully at sketches and charts. I took careful notes and looked them over each night before I went to sleep. If I may say so, I consider myself to be quite the expert on snakes.”

“Aha!” Sunny cried, disentangling herself from the Incredibly Deadly Viper.

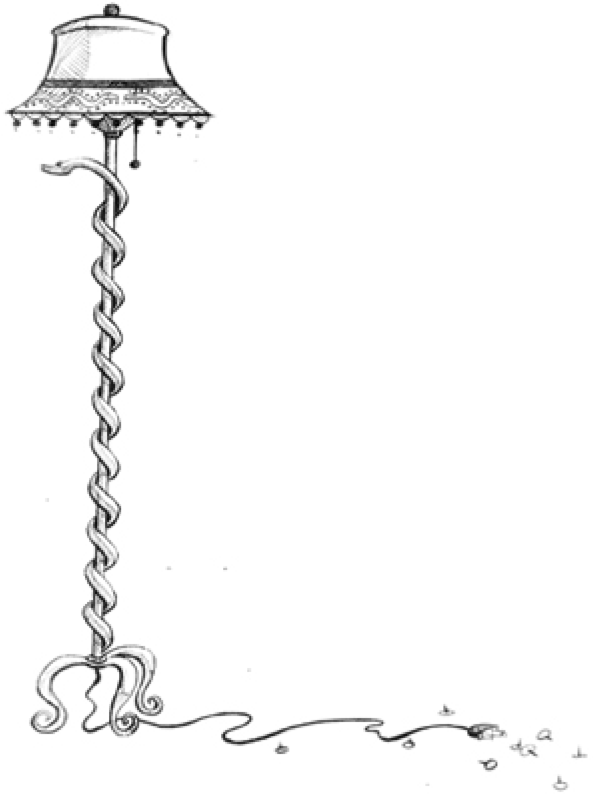
“Sunny! You’re unharmed!” Mr. Poe cried.

“Aha!” Sunny cried again, pointing at Stephano. The Incredibly Deadly Viper blinked its green eyes triumphantly.

Mr. Poe looked at Klaus, puzzled. “What does your sister mean by ‘Aha’?” he asked.

Klaus sighed. He felt, sometimes, as if he had spent half his life explaining things to Mr. Poe. “By ‘Aha,’” he said, “she means ‘One minute’ Stephano claims he knows nothing about snakes, the next he claims he is an expert! By ‘Aha’ she means ‘Stephano has been lying to us.’ By ‘Aha’ she means ‘we’ve finally exposed his dishonesty to you!’ By ‘Aha’ she means ‘*Aha*!’”

CHAPTER



Eleven

Meanwhile, back at the ranch, Violet was upstairs, surveying her bedroom with a critical eye. She took a deep breath, and then tied her hair in a ribbon, to keep it out of her eyes. As you and I and everyone who is familiar with Violet know, when she ties her hair back like that, it is because she needs to think up an invention. And right now she needed to think of one quickly.

Violet had realized, when her brother had talked about Stephano ordering them to carry his suitcase into the house, that the evidence she had been looking for was undoubtedly in that very suitcase. And now, while her siblings were distracting the adults in the Reptile Room, would be her only opportunity to open the suitcase and retrieve proof of Stephano's evil plot. But her aching shoulder was a reminder that she couldn't simply open the suitcase—it was locked, with a lock as shiny as Stephano's scheming eyes. I confess that if I were in Violet's place, with only a few minutes to open a locked suitcase, instead of on the deck of my friend Bela's yacht, writing this down, I probably would have given up hope. I would have sunk to the floor of the bedroom and pounded my fists against the carpet wondering why in the world life was so unfair and filled with inconveniences.

Luckily for the Baudelaires, however, Violet was made of sterner stuff, and she took a good look around her bedroom for anything that might help her. There wasn't much in the way of inventing materials. Violet longed for a good room in which to invent things, filled with wires and gears and all of the necessary equipment to invent really top-notch devices. Uncle Monty was in fact in possession of many of these supplies, but, to Violet's frustration as she thought of this, they were located in the Reptile Room. She looked at the pieces of butcher paper tacked to the wall, where she had hoped to sketch out inventions as she lived in Uncle Monty's house. The trouble had begun so quickly that Violet had only a few scribblings on one of the sheets, which she had written by the light of a floorlamp on her first night here. Violet's eyes traveled to the floorlamp as she remembered that evening, and when she reached the electric socket she had an idea.

We all know, of course, that we should never, ever,

ever, *ever* fiddle around in any way with electric devices. *Never*: There are two reasons for this. One is that you can get electrocuted, which is not only deadly but very unpleasant, and the other is that you are not Violet Baudelaire, one of the few people in the world who know how to handle such things. And even Violet was very careful and nervous as she unplugged the lamp and took a long look at the plug itself. It might work.

Hoping that Klaus and Sunny were continuing to stall the adults successfully, Violet wiggled the two prongs of the plug this way and that until at last they came loose from their plastic casing. She now had two small metal strips. Violet then took one of the thumbtacks out of the butcher paper, letting the paper curl down the wall as if it were lazy. With the sharp end of the tack she poked and prodded the two pieces of metal until one was hooked around the other, and then forced the thumbtack between the two pieces so the sharp end stuck straight out. The result looked like a piece of metal you might not notice if it lay in the street, but in fact what Violet had made was a crude—the word “crude” here means “roughly made at the last minute” rather than “rude or ill-mannered”—lockpick. Lockpicks, as you probably know, are devices that work as if they were proper keys, usually used by bad guys to rob houses or escape from jail, but this was one of the rare times when a lockpick was being used by a good guy: Violet Baudelaire.

Violet walked quietly back down the stairs, holding her lockpick in one hand and crossing her fingers with the other. She tiptoed past the enormous door of the Reptile Room and hoped that her absence would not be noticed as she slipped outside. Deliberately averting her eyes from Dr. Lucafont’s car to avoid catching even a glimpse of Uncle Monty’s body, the eldest Baudelaire walked toward the pile of suitcases. She looked first at the old ones belonging to the Baudelaires. Those suitcases contained, she remembered, lots of ugly, itchy clothing that Mrs. Poe had bought for them soon after their parents died. For a few seconds, Violet found herself staring at the suitcases, remembering how effortless her life had been before all this trouble had set upon them, and how surprising it was to find herself in such miserable circumstances now. This may not be surprising to us, because we know how disastrous the lives of the Baudelaire orphans are, but Violet’s misfortune was constantly surprising to her and it took her a minute to push thoughts of their situation out of her head and to concentrate on what she had to do.

She knelt down to get closer to Stephano’s suitcase, held the shiny silver padlock in one hand, took a deep breath, and stuck the lockpick into the keyhole. It went inside, but when she tried to turn it around, it scarcely budged, only scraped a little at the inside of the keyhole. It needed to move more smoothly or it would never work. Violet took her lockpick out and wet it with her mouth, grimacing at the stale taste of the metal. Then she stuck the lockpick into the keyhole again and tried to move it. It wiggled slightly and then lay still.

Violet took the lockpick out and thought very, very hard, retying her hair in the ribbon. As she cleared the hair from her eyes, though, she felt a sudden prickle on her skin. It was unpleasant and familiar. It was the feeling of being watched. She looked quickly behind her, but saw only the snake-shaped hedges on the lawn. She looked to the side and saw only the driveway leading down to Lousy Lane. But then she looked straight ahead, through the glass walls of the Reptile Room.

It had never occurred to her that people could see in through the Reptile Room’s walls as clearly as they could see out, but when she looked up Violet could see, through the cages of reptiles, the figure of Mr. Poe leaping up and down excitedly. You and I know, of course, that Mr. Poe was panicking over Sunny and the Incredibly Deadly Viper, but all Violet knew was that whatever ruse her siblings had devised was still working. The prickle on her skin was not explained, however, until she looked a little closer, just to the right of Mr. Poe, and saw that Stephano was looking right back at her.

Her mouth fell open in surprise and panic. She knew that any second now, Stephano would invent an excuse to leave the Reptile Room and come find her, and she hadn’t even opened the suitcase. Quickly, quickly, quickly, she had to find some way to make her lockpick work. She looked down at the damp gravel of the driveway, and up at the dim, yellowish afternoon sun. She looked at her own hands, smudged with dust from picking apart the electric plug, and that's when she thought of something.

Jumping to her feet, Violet sprinted back into the house as if Stephano were already after her and pushed her way through the door into the kitchen. Shoving a chair to the floor in her haste, she grabbed a bar of soap from the dripping sink. She rubbed the slippery substance carefully over her lockpick until the entire invention had a thin, slick coating. Her heart pounding in her chest, she ran back outside, taking a hurried look through the walls of the Reptile Room. Stephano was saying something to Mr. Poe—he was bragging about his expertise of snakes, but Violet had no way of knowing that—and Violet took this moment to kneel down and stick the lockpick back into the keyhole of the padlock. It spun quickly all the way around and then snapped in two, right in her hands. There was a faint sputter of sound as one half fell to the grass, the other one sticking in the keyhole like a jagged tooth. Her lockpick was destroyed.

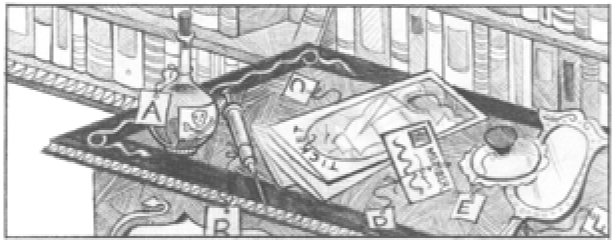
Violet closed her eyes for a moment in despair, and then pulled herself to her feet, using the suitcase to gain her balance. When she put her hand on the suitcase, however, the padlock swung open, and the case tipped open and spilled everything all over the ground. Violet fell back down in surprise. Somehow, as the lock-pick turned, it must have unstuck the lock. Sometimes even in the most unfortunate of lives there will occur a moment or two of good fortune.

It is very difficult, experts have told us, to find a needle in a haystack, which is why "needle in a haystack" has become a rather hackneyed phrase meaning "something that is difficult to find." The reason it is difficult to find a needle in a haystack, of course, is that out of all the things in a haystack, the needle is only one of them. If, however, you were looking for *anything* in a haystack, that wouldn't be difficult at all, because once you started sifting through the haystack you would most certainly find something: hay, of course, but also dirt, bugs, a few farming tools, and maybe even a man who had escaped from prison and was hiding there. When Violet searched through the contents of Stephano's suitcase, it was more like looking for *anything* in a haystack, because she didn't know exactly what she wanted to find. Therefore it was actually fairly easy to find useful items of evidence: a glass vial with a sealed rubber cap, as one might find in a scientific laboratory; a syringe with a sharp needle, like the one your doctor uses to give you shots; a small bunch of folded papers; a card laminated in plastic; a powder puff and small hand mirror.

Even though she knew she had only a few more moments, Violet separated these items from the smelly clothes and the bottle of wine that were also in the suitcase, and looked at all her evidence very carefully, concentrating on each item as if they were small parts out of which she was going to make a machine. And in a way, they were. Violet Baudelaire needed to arrange these pieces of evidence to defeat Stephano’s evil plan and bring justice and peace into the lives of the Baudelaire orphans for the first time since their parents perished in the terrible fire. Violet gazed at each piece of evidence, thinking very hard, and before too long, her face lit up the way it always did when all the pieces of something were fit together properly and the machine worked just the way it should.

CHAPTER

Twelve



I promise you that this is the last time that I will use the phrase “meanwhile, back at the ranch,” but I can think of no other way to return to the moment when Klaus has just explained to Mr. Poe what Sunny had meant by shouting “Aha!” and now everyone in the Reptile Room was staring at Stephano. Sunny looked triumphant. Klaus looked defiant. Mr. Poe looked furious. Dr. Lucafont looked worried. You couldn’t tell how the Incredibly Deadly Viper looked, because the facial expressions of snakes are difficult to read. Stephano looked back at all these people silently, his face fluttering as he tried to decide whether to come clean, a phrase which here means “admit that he’s really Count Olaf and up to no good,” or perpetuate his deception, a phrase which here means “lie, lie, lie.”

“Stephano,” Mr. Poe said, and coughed into his handkerchief. Klaus and Sunny waited impatiently for him to continue. “Stephano, explain yourself. You have just told us that you are an expert on snakes. Previously, however, you told us you knew nothing of snakes, and therefore couldn’t have been involved in Dr. Montgomery’s death. What is going on?”

“When I told you I knew nothing of snakes,” Stephano said, “I was being modest. Now, if you will excuse me, I have to go outside for a moment, and—”

“You weren’t being modest!” Klaus cried. “You were *lying*! And you are lying now! You’re nothing but a liar and murderer!”

Stephano’s eyes grew wide and his face clouded in anger. “You have no evidence of that,” he said.

“Yes we do,” said a voice in the doorway, and everyone turned around to find Violet standing there, with a smile on her face and evidence in her arms. Triumphantly, she walked across the Reptile Room to the far end, where the books Klaus had been reading about the Mamba du Mal were still stacked in a pile. The others followed her, walking down the aisles of reptiles. Silently, she arranged the objects in a line on top of a table: the glass vial with the sealed rubber cap, the syringe with the sharp needle, the small bunch of folded papers, a card laminated in plastic, the powder puff and the small hand mirror.

“What is all this?” Mr. Poe said, gesturing to the arrangement.

“This,” Violet said, “is evidence, which I found in Stephano’s suitcase.”

“My suitcase,” Stephano said, “is private property, which you are not allowed to touch. It’s very rude of you, and besides, it was locked.”

“It was an emergency,” Violet said calmly, “so I picked the lock.”

“How did you do that?” Mr. Poe asked. “Nice girls shouldn’t know how to do such things.”

“My sister *is* a nice girl,” Klaus said, “and she knows how to do all sorts of things.”

“Roofik!” Sunny agreed.

“Well, we’ll discuss that later,” Mr. Poe said. “In the meantime, please continue.”

“When Uncle Monty died,” Violet began, “my siblings and I were very sad, but we were also very suspicious.”

“We weren’t suspicious!” Klaus exclaimed. “If someone is suspicious, it means they’re not sure! We were *positive* that Stephano killed him!”

“Nonsense!” Dr. Lucafont said. “As I explained to all of you, Montgomery Montgomery’s death was an accident. The Mamba du Mal escaped from its cage and bit him, and that’s all there is to it.”

“I beg your pardon,” Violet said, “but that is *not* all there is to it. Klaus read up on the Mamba du Mal, and found out how it kills its victims.”

Klaus walked over to the stack of books and opened the one on top. He had marked his place with a small piece of paper, so he found what he was looking for right away. “‘The Mamba du Mal,’” he read out loud, “‘is one of the deadliest snakes in the hemisphere, noted for its strangulatory grip, used in conjunction with its deadly venom, giving all of its victims a tenebrous hue, which is ghastly to behold.’” He put the book down, and turned to Mr. Poe. “‘Strangulatory’ means—”

“We *know* what the words mean!” Stephano shouted.

“Then you must know,” Klaus said, “that the Mamba du Mal did not kill Uncle Monty. His body didn’t have a tenebrous hue. It was as pale as could be.”

“That’s true,” Mr. Poe said, “but it doesn’t necessarily indicate that Dr. Montgomery was murdered.”

“Yes,” Dr. Lucafont said. “Perhaps, just this once, the snake didn’t feel like bruising its victim.”

“It is more likely,” Violet said, “that Uncle Monty was killed with these items.” She held up the glass vial with the sealed rubber cap. “This vial is labeled ‘Venom du Mal,’ and it’s obviously from Uncle Monty’s cabinet of venom samples.” She then held up the syringe with the sharp needle. “Stephano—Olaf—took this syringe and injected the venom into Uncle Monty. Then he poked an extra hole, so it would look like the snake had bitten him.”

"But I loved Dr. Montgomery," Stephano said. "I would have had nothing to gain from his death."

Sometimes, when someone tells a ridiculous lie, it is best to ignore it entirely. "When I turn eighteen, as we all know," Violet continued, ignoring Stephano entirely, "I inherit the Baudelaire fortune, and Stephano intended to get that fortune for himself. It would be easier to do so if we were in a location that was more difficult to trace, such as Peru." Violet held up the small bunch of folded papers. "These are tickets for the *Prospero*, leaving Hazy Harbor for Peru at five o'clock today. That's where Stephano was taking us when we happened to run into you, Mr. Poe."

"But Uncle Monty tore up Stephano's ticket to Peru," Klaus said, looking confused. "I saw him."

"That's true," Violet said. "That's why he had to get Uncle Monty out of the way. He killed Uncle Monty—" Violet stopped for a minute and shuddered. "He killed Uncle Monty, and took this laminated card. It's Monty's membership card for the Herpetological Society. Stephano planned to pose as Uncle Monty to get on board the *Prospero*, and whisk us away to Peru."

"But I don't understand," Mr. Poe said. "How did Stephano even know about your fortune?"

"Because he's really Count Olaf," Violet said, exasperated that she had to explain what she and her siblings and you and I knew the moment Stephano arrived at the house. "He may have shaved his head, and trimmed off his eyebrows, but the only way he could get rid of the tattoo on his left ankle was with this powder puff and hand mirror. There's makeup all over his left ankle, to hide the eye, and I'll bet if we rub it with a cloth we can see the tattoo."

"That's absurd!" Stephano cried.

"We'll see about that," Mr. Poe replied. "Now, who has a cloth?"

"Not me," Klaus said.

“Not me,” Violet said.

“Guweel!” Sunny said.

“Well, if nobody has a cloth, we might as well forget the whole thing,” Dr. Lucafont said, but Mr. Poe held up a finger to tell him to wait. To the relief of the Baudelaire orphans, he reached into his pocket and withdrew his handkerchief.

“Your left ankle, please,” he said sternly to Stephano.

“But you’ve been coughing into that all day!” Stephano said. “It has germs!”

“If you are really who the children say you are,” Mr. Poe said, “then germs are the least of your problems. Your left ankle, please.”

Stephano—and this is the last time, thank goodness, we’ll have to call him by his phony name—gave a little growl, and pulled his left pants leg up to reveal his ankle. Mr. Poe knelt down and rubbed at it for a few moments. At first, nothing appeared to happen, but then, like a sun shining through clouds at the end of a terrible rainstorm, the faint outline of an eye began to appear. Clearer and clearer it grew until it was as dark as it had been when the orphans first saw it, back when they had lived with Count Olaf.

Violet, Klaus, and Sunny all stared at the eye, and the eye stared back. For the first time in their lives, the Baudelaire orphans were happy to see it.

CHAPTER

THIS SIDE UP

Thirteen

If this were a book written to entertain small children, you would know what would happen next. With the villain's identity and evil plans exposed, the police would arrive on the scene and place him in a jail for the rest of his life, and the plucky youngsters would go out for pizza and live happily ever after. But this book is about the Baudelaire orphans, and you and I know that these three unfortunate children living happily ever after is about as likely as Uncle Monty returning to life. But it seemed to the Baudelaire orphans, as the tattoo became evident, that at least a little bit of Uncle Monty had come back to them as they proved Count Olaf's treachery once and for all.

"That's the eye, all right," Mr. Poe said, and stopped rubbing Count Olaf's ankle. "You are most definitely Count Olaf, and you are most definitely under arrest."

"And I am most definitely shocked," Dr. Lucafont said, clapping his oddly solid hands to his head.

“As am I,” Mr. Poe agreed, grabbing Count Olaf’s arm in case he tried to run anywhere. “Violet, Klaus, Sunny—please forgive me for not believing you earlier. It just seemed too far-fetched that he would have searched you out, disguised himself as a laboratory assistant, and concocted an elaborate plan to steal your fortune.”

“I wonder what happened to Gustav, Uncle Monty’s *real* lab assistant?” Klaus wondered out loud. “If Gustav hadn’t quit, then Uncle Monty never would have hired Count Olaf.”

Count Olaf had been quiet this whole time, ever since the tattoo had appeared. His shiny eyes had darted this way and that, watching everyone carefully the way a lion will watch a herd of antelope, looking for the one that would be best to kill and eat. But at the mention of Gustav’s name, he spoke up.

“Gustav didn’t quit,” he said in his wheezy voice. “Gustav is *dead*! One day when he was out collecting wildflowers I drowned him in the Swarthy Swamp. Then I forged a note saying he quit.” Count Olaf looked at the three children as if he were going to run over and strangle them, but instead he stood absolutely still, which somehow was even scarier. “But that’s nothing compared to what I will do to you, orphans. You have won this round of the game, but I will return for your fortune, and for your precious skin.”

“This is not a game, you horrible man,” Mr. Poe said. “Dominos is a game. Water polo is a game. Murder is a crime, and you will go to jail for it. I will drive you to the police station in town right this very minute. Oh, drat, I can’t. My car is wrecked. Well, I’ll take you down in Dr. Montgomery’s jeep, and you children can follow along in Dr. Lucafont’s car. I guess you’ll be able to see the inside of a doctor’s automobile, after all.”

“It might be easier,” Dr. Lucafont said, “to put Stephano in my car, and have the children follow behind. After all, Dr. Montgomery’s body is in my car, so there’s no room for all three children, anyway.”

“Well,” Mr. Poe said, “I’d hate to disappoint the children after they’ve had such a trying time. We can move Dr. Montgomery’s body to the jeep, and—”

“We couldn’t care less about the inside of a doctor’s automobile,” Violet said impatiently. “We only made that up so we wouldn’t be trapped alone with Count Olaf.”

“You shouldn’t tell lies, orphans,” Count Olaf said.

“I don’t think you are in a position to give moral lectures to children, Olaf,” Mr. Poe said sternly. “All right, Dr. Lucafont, *you* take him.”

Dr. Lucafont grabbed Count Olaf’s shoulder with one of his oddly stiff hands, and led the way out of the Reptile Room and to the front door, stopping at the doorway to give Mr. Poe and the three children a thin smile.

“Say good-bye to the orphans, Count Olaf,” Dr. Lucafont said.

“Good-bye,” Count Olaf said.

“Good-bye,” Violet said.

“Good-bye,” Klaus said.

Mr. Poe coughed into his handkerchief and gave a sort of disgusted half-wave at Count Olaf, indicating good-bye. But Sunny didn’t say anything. Violet and Klaus looked down at her, surprised that she hadn’t said “Yeet!” or “Libo!” or any of her various terms for “good-bye.” But Sunny was staring at Dr. Lucafont with a determined look in her eye, and in a moment she had leaped into the air and bitten him on the hand.

“Sunny!” Violet said, and was about to apologize for her behavior when she saw Dr. Lucafont’s whole hand come loose from his arm and fall to the floor. As Sunny clamped down on it with her four sharp teeth, the hand made a crackling sound, like breaking wood or plastic rather than skin or bone. And when Violet looked at the place where Dr. Lucafont’s hand had been, she saw no blood or indication of a wound, but a shiny, metal hook. Dr. Lucafont looked at the hook, too, and then at Violet, and grinned horribly. Count Olaf grinned too, and in a second the two of them had darted out the door.

“The hook-handed man!” Violet shouted. “He’s not a doctor! He’s one of Count Olaf’s henchmen!” Instinctively, Violet grabbed the air where the two men had been standing, but of course they weren’t there. She opened the front door wide and saw the two of them sprinting through the snake-shaped hedges.

“After them!” Klaus shouted, and the three Baudelaires started to run through the door. But Mr. Poe stepped in front of them and blocked their way.

“No!” he cried.

“But it’s the hook-handed man!” Violet shouted. “He and Olaf will get away!”

“I can’t let you run out after two dangerous criminals,” Mr. Poe replied. “I am responsible for the safety of you children, and I will not have any harm come to you.”

“Then *you* go after them!” Klaus cried. “But hurry!”

Mr. Poe began to step out the door, but he stopped when he heard the roar of a car engine starting up. The two ruffians—a word which here means “horrible people”—had reached Dr. Lucafont’s car, and were already driving away.

“Get in the jeep!” Violet exclaimed. “Follow them!”

“A grown man,” Mr. Poe said sternly, “does not get involved in a car chase. This is a job for the police. I’ll go call them now, and maybe they can set up roadblocks.”

The Baudelaire youngsters watched Mr. Poe shut the door and race to the telephone, and their hearts sank. They knew it was no use. By the time Mr. Poe was through explaining the situation to the police, Count Olaf and the hook-handed man were sure to be long gone. Suddenly exhausted, Violet, Klaus, and Sunny walked to Uncle Monty's enormous staircase and sat down on the bottom step, listening to the faint sound of Mr. Poe talking on the phone. They knew that trying to find Count Olaf and the hook-handed man, particularly when it grew dark, would be like trying to find a needle in a haystack.

Despite their anxiety over Count Olaf's escape, the three orphans must have fallen asleep for a few hours, for the next thing they knew, it was nighttime and they were still on the bottom step. Somebody had placed a blanket over them, and as they stretched themelves, they saw three men in overalls walking out of the Reptile Room, carrying some of the reptiles in their cages. Behind them walked a chubby man in a brightly colored plaid suit, who stopped when he saw they were awake.

"Hey, kids," the chubby man said in a loud, booming voice. "I'm sorry if I woke you up, but my team has to move quickly."

"Who are you?" Violet asked. It is confusing to fall asleep in the daytime and wake up at night.

"What are you doing with Uncle Monty's reptiles?" Klaus asked. It is also confusing to realize you have been sleeping on stairs, rather than in a bed or sleeping bag.

"Dixnik?" Sunny asked. It is always confusing why anyone would choose to wear a plaid suit.

"The name's Bruce," Bruce said. "I'm the director of marketing for the Herpetological Society. Your friend Mr. Poe called me to come and retrieve the snakes now that Dr. Montgomery has passed on. 'Retrieve' means 'take away.'"

"We *know* what the word 'retrieve' means," Klaus said, "but why are you taking them? Where are they going?"

"Well, you three are the orphans, right? You'll be moving on to some other relative who won't die on you like Montgomery did. And these snakes need to be taken care of, so we're giving them away to other scientists, zoos, and retirement homes. Those we can't find homes for we'll have put to sleep."

"But they're Uncle Monty's collection!" Klaus cried. "It took him years to find all these reptiles! You can't just scatter them to the winds!"

"It's the way it has to be," Bruce said smoothly. He was still talking in a very loud voice, for no apparent reason.

"Viper!" Sunny shouted, and began to crawl toward the Reptile Room.

"What my sister means," Violet explained, "is that she's very close friends with one of the snakes. Could we take just one with us—the Incredibly Deadly Viper?"

"First off, *no*," Bruce said. "That guy Poe said all the snakes now belong to us. And second off, if you think I'm going to let small children near the Incredibly Deadly Viper, think again."

"But the Incredibly Deadly Viper is harmless," Violet said. "Its name is a misnomer."

Bruce scratched his head. "A what?"

"That means 'a wrong name,'" Klaus explained. "Uncle Monty discovered it, so he got to name it."

"But this guy was supposed to be brilliant," Bruce said. He reached into a pocket in his plaid jacket and pulled out a cigar. "Giving a snake a wrong name doesn't sound brilliant to me. It sounds idiotic. But then, what can you expect from a man whose own name was Montgomery Montgomery?"

"It is not nice," Klaus said, "to lampoon someone's name like that."

"I don't have time to ask you what 'lampoon' means," Bruce said. "But if the baby here wants to wave bye-bye to the Incredibly Deadly Viper, she'd better do it soon. It's already outside."

Sunny began to crawl toward the front door, but Klaus was not through talking to Bruce. “Our Uncle Monty *was* brilliant,” he said firmly.

“He was a brilliant man,” Violet agreed, “and we will always remember him as such.”

“Brilliant!” Sunny shrieked, in mid-crawl, and her siblings smiled down at her, surprised she had uttered a word that everyone could understand.

Bruce lit his cigar and blew smoke into the air, then shrugged. “It’s nice you feel that way, kid,” he said. “Good luck wherever they put you.” He looked at a shiny diamond watch on his wrist, and turned to talk to the men in overalls. “Let’s get a move on. In five minutes we have to be back on that road that smells like ginger.”

“It’s *horseradish*,” Violet corrected, but Bruce had already walked away. She and Klaus looked at each other, and then began following Sunny outside to wave good-bye to their reptile friends. But as they reached the door, Mr. Poe walked into the room and blocked them again.

“I see you’re awake,” he said. “Please go upstairs and go to sleep, then. We have to get up very early in the morning.”

“We just want to say good-bye to the snakes,” Klaus said, but Mr. Poe shook his head.

“You’ll get in Bruce’s way,” he replied. “Plus, I would think you three would never want to see a snake again.”

The Baudelaire orphans looked at one another and sighed. Everything in the world seemed wrong. It was wrong that Uncle Monty was dead. It was wrong that Count Olaf and the hook-handed man had escaped. It was wrong for Bruce to think of Monty as a person with a silly name, instead of a brilliant scientist. And it was wrong to assume that the children never wanted to see a snake again. The snakes, and indeed everything in the Reptile Room, were the last reminders the Baudelaires had of the few happy days they’d spent there at the house—the few happy days they’d had since their parents had perished. Even though they understood that Mr. Poe wouldn’t let them live alone with the reptiles, it was all wrong never to see them again, without even saying good-bye.

Ignoring Mr. Poe’s instructions, Violet, Klaus, and Sunny rushed out the front door where the men in overalls were loading the cages into a van with “Herpetological Society” written on the back. It was a full moon, and the moonlight reflected off the glass walls of the Reptile Room as though it were a large jewel with a bright, bright shine—*brilliant*, one might say. When Bruce had used the word “brilliant” about Uncle Monty, he meant “having a reputation for cleverness or intelligence.” But when the children used the word—and when they thought of it now, staring at the Reptile Room glowing in the moonlight—it meant more than that. It meant that even in the bleak circumstances of their current situation, even throughout the series of unfortunate events that would happen to them for the rest of their lives, Uncle Monty and his kindness would shine in their memories. Uncle Monty was brilliant, and their time with him was brilliant. Bruce and his men from the Herpetological Society could dismantle Uncle Monty’s collection, but nobody could ever dismantle the way the Baudelaires would think of him.

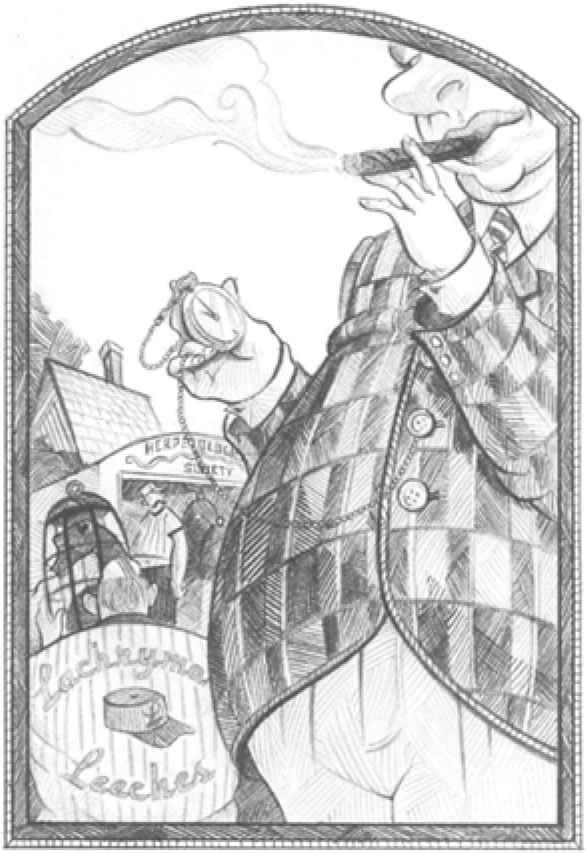
“Good-bye, good-bye!” the Baudelaire orphans called, as the Incredibly Deadly Viper was loaded into the truck. “Good-bye, good-bye!” they called, and even though the Viper was Sunny’s special friend, Violet and Klaus found themselves crying along with their sister, and when the Incredibly Deadly Viper looked up to see them, they saw that it was crying too, tiny shiny tears falling from its green eyes. The Viper was brilliant, too, and as the children looked at one another, they saw their own tears and the way they shone.

“You’re brilliant,” Violet murmured to Klaus, “reading up on the Mamba du Mal.”

“You’re brilliant,” Klaus murmured back, “getting the evidence out of Stephano’s suitcase.”

“Brilliant!” Sunny said again, and Violet and Klaus gave their baby sister a hug. Even the youngest Baudelaire was brilliant, for distracting the adults with the Incredibly Deadly Viper.

“Good-bye, good-bye!” the brilliant Baudelaires called, and waved to Uncle Monty’s reptiles. They stood together in the moonlight, and kept waving, even when Bruce shut the doors of the van, even as the van drove past the snake-shaped hedges and down the driveway to Lousy Lane, and even when it turned a corner and disappeared into the dark.


HERP OLOG
S ETY
Lachrymo
Leeches

To My Kind Editor,

I am writing to you from the shores of Lake Lachrymose, where I am examining the remains of Aunt Josephine's house in order to completely understand everything that happened when the Baudelaire orphans found themselves here.

Please go to the Café Kafka at 4 P.M. next Wednesday and order a pot of jasmine tea from the tallest waiter on duty. Unless my enemies have succeeded, he will bring you a large envelope instead. Inside the envelope, you will find my description of these horrific events, entitled THE WIDE WINDOW, as well as a sketch of Curdled Cave, a small bag of shattered glass, and the menu from the Anxious Clown restaurant. There will also be a test tube containing one (1) Lachrymose Leech, so that Mr. Helquist can draw an accurate illustration. UNDER NO CIRCUMSTANCES should this test tube be opened.

Remember, you are my last hope that the tales of the Baudelaire orphans can finally be told to the general public.

With all due respect,

Lemony Snicket

Lemony Snicket

Credits

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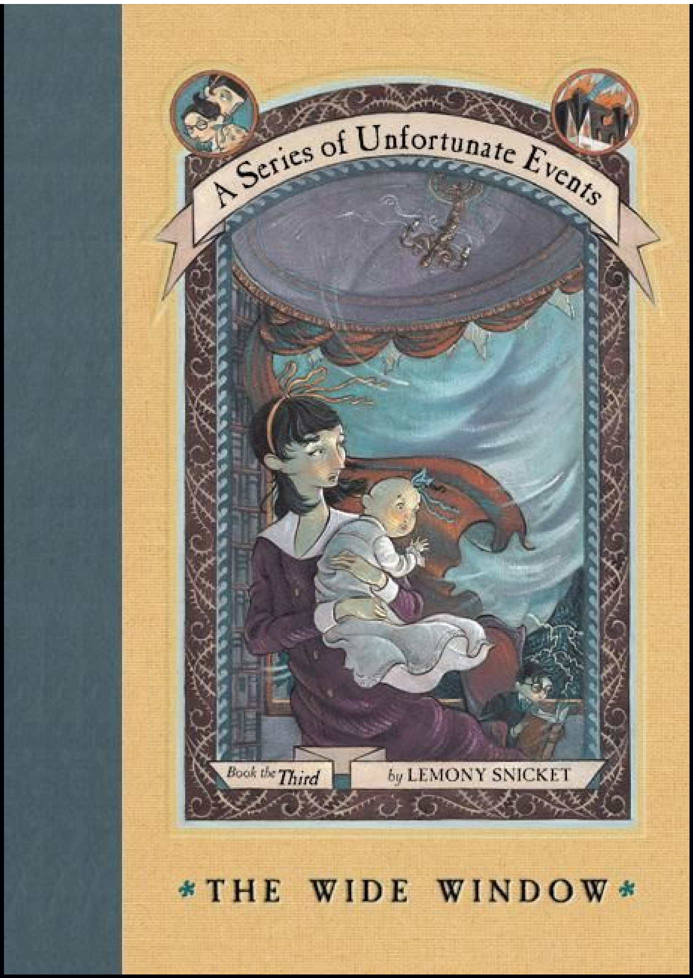
A Series of Unfortunate Events #3: The Wide Window


A Series of Unfortunate Events
Book the Third
by LEMONY SNICKET
THE WIDE WINDOW

A Series of Unfortunate Events

BOOK the Third

THE WIDE WINDOW

***by* LEMONY SNICKET**

***Illustrations by* Brett Helquist**

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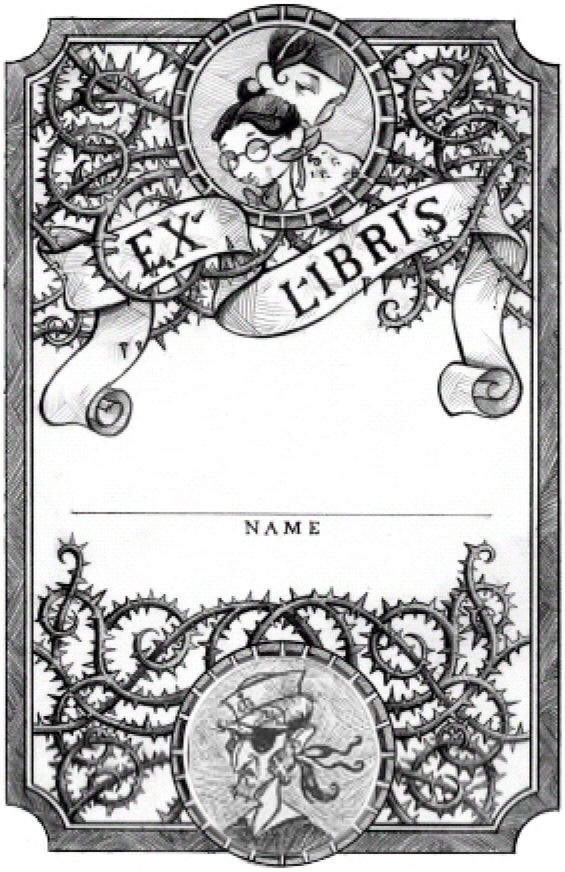
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***Dear Reader*,**

If you have not read anything about the Baudelaire orphans, then before you read even one more sentence, you should know this: Violet, Klaus, and Sunny are kindhearted and quick-witted, but their lives, I am sorry to say, are filled with bad luck and misery. All of the stories about these three children are unhappy and wretched, and the one you are holding may be the worst of them all.

If you haven�t got the stomach for a story that includes a hurricane, a signaling device, hungry leeches, cold cucumber soup, a horrible villain, and a doll named Pretty Penny, then this book will probably fill you with despair.

I will continue to record these tragic tales, for that is what I do. You, however, should decide for yourself whether you can possibly endure this miserable story.

With all due respect,

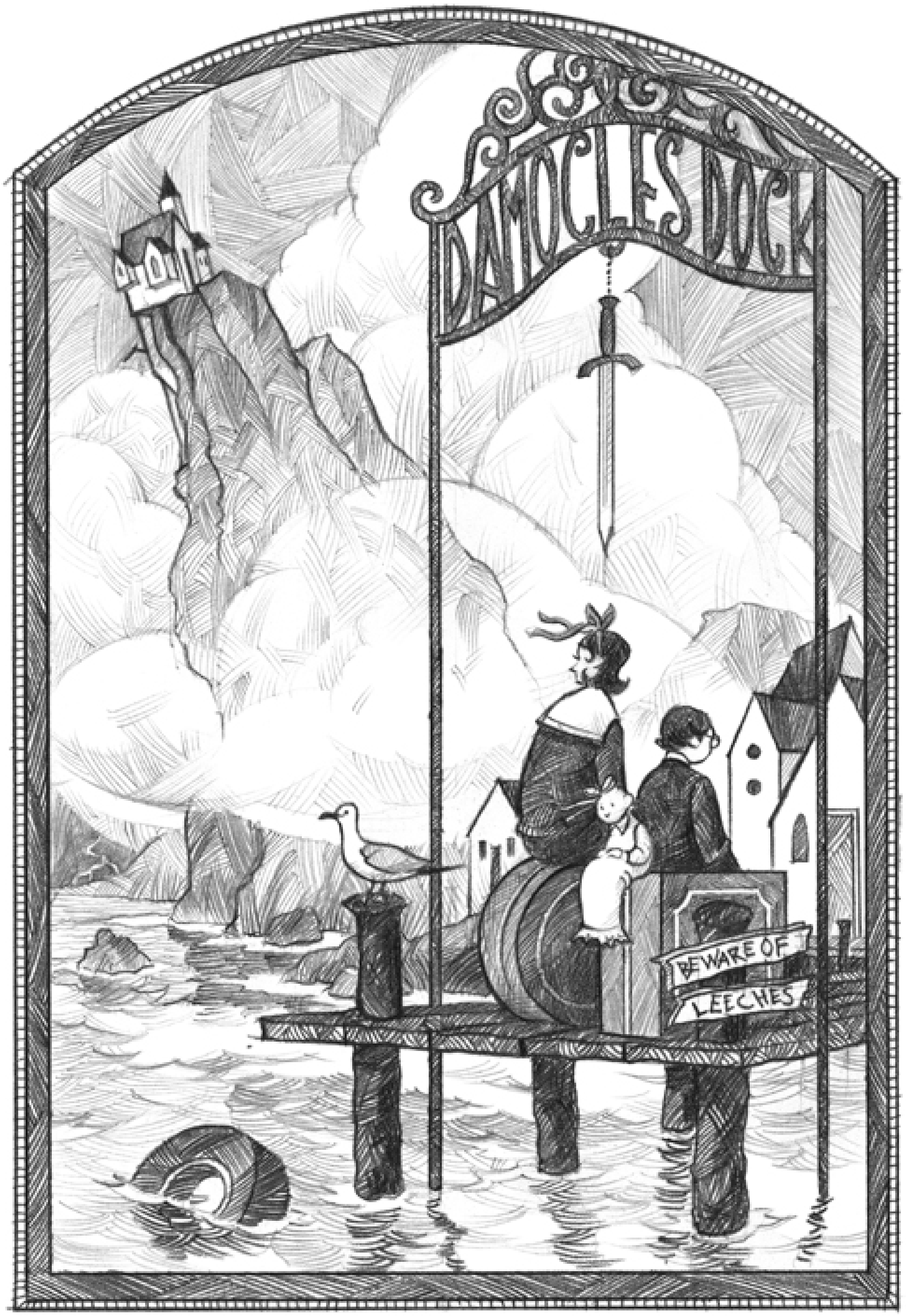
Lemony Snicket

Lemony Snicket

A Series of Unfortunate Events * Lemony Snicket *

For Beatrice—

I would much prefer it if you were alive and well.


DAMOCLES DOCK
BEWARE OF LEECHES

CHAPTER
One

If you didn't know much about the Baudelaire orphans, and you saw them sitting on their suitcases at Damocles Dock, you might think that they were bound for an exciting adventure. After all, the three children had just disembarked from the Fickle Ferry, which had driven them across Lake Lachrymose to live with their Aunt Josephine, and in most cases such a situation would lead to thrillingly good times.

But of course you would be dead wrong. For although Violet, Klaus, and Sunny Baudelaire were about to experience events that would be both exciting and memorable, they would not be exciting and memorable like having your fortune told or going to a rodeo. Their adventure would be exciting and memorable like being chased by a werewolf through a field of thorny bushes at midnight with nobody around to help you. If you are interested in reading a story filled with thrillingly good times, I am sorry to inform you that you are most certainly reading the wrong book, because the Baudelaires experience very few good times over the course of their gloomy and miserable lives. It is a terrible thing, their misfortune, so terrible that I can scarcely bring myself to write about it. So if you do not want to read a story of tragedy and sadness, this is your very last chance to put this book down, because the misery of the Baudelaire orphans begins in the very next paragraph.

"Look what I have for you," Mr. Poe said, grinning from ear to ear and holding out a small paper bag. "Peppermints!" Mr. Poe was a banker who had been placed in charge of handling the affairs of the Baudelaire orphans after their parents died. Mr. Poe was kindhearted, but it is not enough in this world to be kindhearted, particularly if you are responsible for keeping children out of danger. Mr. Poe had known the three children since they were born, and could never remember that they were allergic to peppermints.

“Thank you, Mr. Poe,” Violet said, and took the paper bag and peered inside. Like most fourteen-year-olds, Violet was too well mannered to mention that if she ate a peppermint she would break out in hives, a phrase which here means “be covered in red, itchy rashes for a few hours.” Besides, she was too occupied with inventing thoughts to pay much attention to Mr. Poe. Anyone who knew Violet would know that when her hair was tied up in a ribbon to keep it out of her eyes, the way it was now, her thoughts were filled with wheels, gears, levers, and other necessary things for inventions. At this particular moment she was thinking of how she could improve the engine of the Fickle Ferry so it wouldn’t belch smoke into the gray sky.

“That’s very kind of you,” said Klaus, the middle Baudelaire child, smiling at Mr. Poe and thinking that if he had even one lick of a peppermint, his tongue would swell up and he would scarcely be able to speak. Klaus took his glasses off and wished that Mr. Poe had bought him a book or a newspaper instead. Klaus was a voracious reader, and when he had learned about his allergy at a birthday party when he was eight, he had immediately read all his parents’ books about allergies. Even four years later he could recite the chemical formulas that caused his tongue to swell up.

“Toi!” Sunny shrieked. The youngest Baudelaire was only an infant, and like many infants, she spoke mostly in words that were tricky to understand. By “Toi!” she probably meant “I have never eaten a peppermint because I suspect that I, like my siblings, am allergic to them,” but it was hard to tell. She may also have meant “I wish I could bite a peppermint, because I like to bite things with my four sharp teeth, but I don’t want to risk an allergic reaction.”

"You can eat them on your cab ride to Mrs. Anwhistle's house," Mr. Poe said, coughing into his white handkerchief. Mr. Poe always seemed to have a cold and the Baudelaire orphans were accustomed to receiving information from him between bouts of hacking and wheezing. "She apologizes for not meeting you at the dock, but she says she's frightened of it."

"Why would she be frightened of a dock?" Klaus asked, looking around at the wooden piers and sailboats.

"She's frightened of anything to do with Lake Lachrymose," Mr. Poe said, "but she didn't say why. Perhaps it has to do with her husband's death. Your Aunt Josephine—she's not really your aunt, of course; she's your second cousin's sister-in-law, but asked that you call her Aunt Josephine—your Aunt Josephine lost her husband recently, and it may be possible that he drowned or died in a boat accident. It didn't seem polite to ask how she became a dowager. Well, let's put you in a taxi."

"What does that word mean?" Violet asked.

Mr. Poe looked at Violet and raised his eyebrows. "I'm surprised at you, Violet," he said. "A girl of your age should know that a taxi is a car which will drive you someplace for a fee. Now, let's gather your luggage and walk to the curb."

"'Dowager,'" Klaus whispered to Violet, "is a fancy word for 'widow.'"

"Thank you," she whispered back, picking up her suitcase in one hand and Sunny in the other. Mr. Poe was waving his handkerchief in the air to signal a taxi to stop, and in no time at all the cabdriver piled all of the Baudelaire suitcases into the trunk and Mr. Poe piled the Baudelaire children into the back seat.

"I will say good-bye to you here," Mr. Poe said. "The banking day has already begun, and I'm afraid if I go with you out to Aunt Josephine's I will never get anything done. Please give her my best wishes, and tell her that I will keep in touch regularly." Mr. Poe paused for a moment to cough into his handkerchief before continuing. "Now, your Aunt Josephine is a bit nervous about having three children in her house, but I assured her that you three were very well behaved. Make sure you mind your manners, and, as always, you can call or fax me at the bank if there's any sort of problem. Although I don't imagine anything will go wrong *this* time."

When Mr. Poe said "*this* time," he looked at the children meaningfully as if it were their fault that poor Uncle Monty was dead. But the Baudelaires were too nervous about meeting their new caretaker to say anything more to Mr. Poe except "So long."

"So long," Violet said, putting the bag of peppermints in her pocket.

"So long," Klaus said, taking one last look at Damocles Dock.

"Frul!" Sunny shrieked, chewing on her seat belt buckle.

"So long," Mr. Poe replied, "and good luck to you. I will think of the Baudelaires as often as I can."

Mr. Poe gave some money to the taxi driver and waved good-bye to the three children as the cab pulled away from the dock and onto a gray, cobblestoned street. There was a small grocery store with barrels of limes and beets out front. There was a clothing store called Look! It Fits!, which appeared to be undergoing renovations. There was a terrible-looking restaurant called the Anxious Clown, with neon lights and balloons in the window. But mostly, there were many stores and shops that were all closed up, with boards or metal gratings over the windows and doors.

"The town doesn't seem very crowded," Klaus remarked. "I was hoping we might make some new friends here."

"It's the off-season," the cabdriver said. He was a skinny man with a skinny cigarette hanging out of his mouth, and as he talked to the children he looked at them through the rearview mirror. "The town of Lake Lachrymose is a resort, and when the nice weather comes it's as crowded as can be. But around now, things here are as dead as the cat I ran over this morning. To make new friends, you'll have to wait until the weather gets a little better. Speaking of which, Hurricane Herman is expected to arrive in town in a week or so. You better make sure you have enough food up there in the house."

"A hurricane on a lake?" Klaus asked. "I thought hurricanes only occurred near the ocean."

"A body of water as big as Lake Lachrymose," the driver said, "can have anything occur on it. To tell you the truth, I'd be a little nervous about living on top of this hill. Once the storm hits, it'll be very difficult to drive all the way down into town."

Violet, Klaus, and Sunny looked out the window and saw what the driver meant by "all the way down." The taxi had turned one last corner and arrived at the scraggly top of a tall, tall hill, and the children could see the town far, far below them, the cobblestone road curling around the buildings like a tiny gray snake, and the small square of Damocles Dock with specks of people bustling around it. And out beyond the dock was the inky blob of Lake Lachrymose, huge and dark as if a monster were standing over the three orphans, casting a giant shadow below them. For a few moments the children stared into the lake as if hypnotized by this enormous stain on the landscape.

"The lake is so enormous," Klaus said, "and it looks so deep. I can almost understand why Aunt Josephine is afraid of it."

"The lady who lives up here," the cabdriver asked, "is afraid of the lake?"

"That's what we've been told," Violet said.

The cabdriver shook his head and brought the cab to a halt. "I don't know how she can stand it, then."

"What do you mean?" Violet asked.

"You mean you've never been to this house?" he asked.

"No, never," Klaus replied. "We've never even met our Aunt Josephine before."

"Well, if your Aunt Josephine is afraid of the water," the cabdriver said, "I can't believe she lives here in this house."

"What are you talking about?" Klaus asked.

"Well, take a look," the driver answered, and got out of the cab.

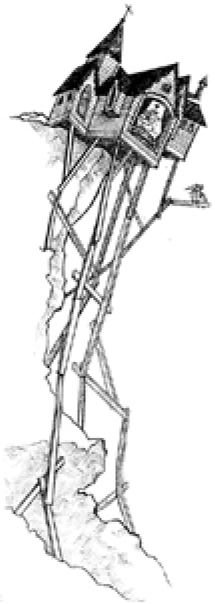
The Baudelaires took a look. At first, the three youngsters saw only a small boxy square with a peeling white door, and it looked as if the house was scarcely bigger than the taxi which had taken them to it. But as they piled out of the car and drew closer, they saw that this small square was the only part of the house that was on top of the hill. The rest of it—a large pile of boxy squares, all stuck together like ice cubes—hung over the side, attached to the hill by long metal stilts that looked like spider legs. As the three orphans peered down at their new home, it seemed as if the entire house were holding on to the hill for dear life.

The taxi driver took their suitcases out of the trunk, set them in front of the peeling white door, and drove down the hill with a *toot*! of his horn for a good-bye. There was a soft squeak as the peeling white door opened, and from behind the door appeared a pale woman with her white hair piled high on top of her head in a bun.

"Hello," she said, smiling thinly. "I'm your Aunt Josephine."

"Hello," Violet said, cautiously, and stepped forward to meet her new guardian. Klaus stepped forward behind her, and Sunny crawled forward behind him, but all three Baudelaires were walking carefully, as if their weight would send the house toppling down from its perch. The orphans couldn't help wondering how a woman who was so afraid of Lake Lachrymose could live in a house that felt like it was about to fall into its depths.

CHAPTER
TWO



"*This* is the radiator," Aunt Josephine said, pointing to a radiator with a pale and skinny finger. "Please don't ever touch it. You may find yourself very cold here in my home. I never turn on the radiator, because I am frightened that it might explode, so it often gets chilly in the evenings."

Violet and Klaus looked at one another briefly, and Sunny looked at both of them. Aunt Josephine was giving them a tour of their new home and so far appeared to be afraid of everything in it, from the welcome mat—which, Aunt Josephine explained, could cause someone to trip and break their neck—to the sofa in the living room, which she said could fall over at any time and crush them flat.

"This is the telephone," Aunt Josephine said, gesturing to the telephone. "It should only be used in emergencies, because there is a danger of electrocution."

“Actually,” Klaus said, “I’ve read quite a bit about electricity. I’m pretty sure that the telephone is perfectly safe.”

Aunt Josephine’s hands fluttered to her white hair as if something had jumped onto her head. “You can’t believe everything you read,” she pointed out.

“I’ve built a telephone from scratch,” Violet said. “If you’d like, I could take the telephone apart and show you how it works. That might make you feel better.”

“I don’t think so,” Aunt Josephine said, frowning.

“Delmo!” Sunny offered, which probably meant something along the lines of “If you wish, I will bite the telephone to show you that it’s harmless.”

“Delmo?” Aunt Josephine asked, bending over to pick up a piece of lint from the faded flowery carpet. “What do you mean by ‘delmo’? I consider myself an expert on the English language, and I have no idea what the word ‘delmo’ means. Is she speaking some other language?”

“Sunny doesn’t speak fluently yet, I’m afraid,” Klaus said, picking his little sister up. “Just baby talk, mostly.”

“Grun!” Sunny shrieked, which meant something like “I object to your calling it baby talk!”

“Well, I will have to teach her proper English,” Aunt Josephine said stiffly. “I’m sure you all need some brushing up on your grammar, actually. Grammar is the greatest joy in life, don’t you find?”

The three siblings looked at one another. Violet was more likely to say that inventing things was the greatest joy in life, Klaus thought reading was, and Sunny of course took no greater pleasure than in biting things. The Baudelaires thought of grammar—all those rules about how to write and speak the English language—the way they thought of banana bread: fine, but nothing to make a fuss about. Still, it seemed rude to contradict Aunt Josephine.

“Yes,” Violet said finally. “We’ve always loved grammar.”

Aunt Josephine nodded, and gave the Baudelaires a small smile. “Well, I’ll show you to your room and continue the rest of the tour after dinner. When you open this door, just push on the wood here. Never use the doorknob. I’m always afraid that it will shatter into a million pieces and that one of them will hit my eye.”

The Baudelaires were beginning to think that they would not be allowed to touch a single object in the whole house, but they smiled at Aunt Josephine, pushed on the wood, and opened the door to reveal a large, well-lit room with blank white walls and a plain blue carpet on the floor. Inside were two good-sized beds and one good-sized crib, obviously for Sunny, each covered in a plain blue bedspread, and at the foot of each bed was a large trunk, for storing things. At the other end of the room was a large closet for everyone’s clothes, a small window for looking out, and a medium-sized pile of tin cans for no apparent purpose.

“I’m sorry that all three of you have to share a room,” Aunt Josephine said, “but this house isn’t very big. I tried to provide you with everything you would need, and I do hope you will be comfortable.”

“I’m sure we will,” Violet said, carrying her suitcase into the room. “Thank you very much, Aunt Josephine.”

“In each of your trunks,” Aunt Josephine said, “there is a present.”

Presents? The Baudelaires had not received presents for a long, long time. Smiling, Aunt Josephine walked to the first trunk and opened it. “For Violet,” she said, “there is a lovely new doll with plenty of outfits for it to wear.” Aunt Josephine reached inside and pulled out a plastic doll with a tiny mouth and wide, staring eyes. “Isn’t she adorable? Her name is Pretty Penny.”

“Oh, thank you,” said Violet, who at fourteen was too old for dolls and had never particularly liked dolls anyway. Forcing a smile on her face, she took Pretty Penny from Aunt Josephine and patted it on its little plastic head.

“And for Klaus,” Aunt Josephine said, “there is a model train set.” She opened the second trunk and pulled out a tiny train car. “You can set up the tracks in that empty corner of the room.”

“What fun,” said Klaus, trying to look excited. Klaus had never liked model trains, as they were a lot of work to put together and when you were done all you had was something that went around and around in endless circles.

“And for little Sunny,” Aunt Josephine said, reaching into the smallest trunk, which sat at the foot of the crib, “here is a rattle. See, Sunny, it makes a little noise.”

Sunny smiled at Aunt Josephine, showing all four of her sharp teeth, but her older siblings knew that Sunny despised rattles and the irritating sounds they made when you shook them. Sunny had been given a rattle when she was very small, and it was the only thing she was not sorry to lose in the enormous fire that had destroyed the Baudelaire home.

“It is so generous of you,” Violet said, “to give us all of these things.” She was too polite to add that they weren’t things they particularly liked.

“Well, I am very happy to have you here,” Aunt Josephine said. “I love grammar so much. I’m excited to be able to share my love of grammar with three nice children like yourselves. Well, I’ll give you a few minutes to settle in and then we’ll have some dinner. See you soon.”

“Aunt Josephine,” Klaus asked, “what are these cans for?”

“Those cans? For burglars, naturally,” Aunt Josephine said, patting the bun of hair on top of her head. “You must be as frightened of burglars as I am. So every night, simply place these tin cans right by the door, so that when burglars come in, they’ll trip over the cans and you’ll wake up.”

"But what will we do then, when we're awake in a room with an angry burglar?" Violet asked. "I would prefer to sleep through a burglary."

Aunt Josephine's eyes grew wide with fear. "Angry burglars?" she repeated. "*Angry burglars*? Why are you talking about *angry burglars*? Are you trying to make us all even more frightened than we already are?"

"Of course not," Violet stuttered, not pointing out that Aunt Josephine was the one who had brought up the subject. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to frighten you."

"Well, we'll say no more about it," Aunt Josephine said, looking nervously at the tin cans as if a burglar were tripping on them at that very minute. "I'll see you at the dinner table in a few minutes."

Their new guardian shut the door, and the Baudelaire orphans listened to her footsteps padding down the hallway before they spoke.

"Sunny can have Pretty Penny," Violet said, handing the doll to her sister. "The plastic is hard enough for chewing, I think."

"And you can have the model trains, Violet," Klaus said. "Maybe you can take apart the engines and invent something."

"But that leaves you with a rattle," Violet said. "That doesn't seem fair."

"Schu!" Sunny shrieked, which probably meant something along the lines of "It's been a long time since anything in our lives has felt fair."

The Baudelaires looked at one another with bitter smiles. Sunny was right. It wasn't fair that their parents had been taken away from them. It wasn't fair that the evil and revolting Count Olaf was pursuing them wherever they went, caring for nothing but their fortune. It wasn't fair that they moved from relative to relative, with terrible things happening at each of their new homes, as if the Baudelaires were riding on some horrible bus that stopped only at stations of unfairness and misery. And, of course, it certainly wasn't fair that Klaus only had a rattle to play with in his new home.

“Aunt Josephine obviously worked very hard to prepare this room for us,” Violet said sadly. “She seems to be a good-hearted person. We shouldn’t complain, even to ourselves.”

“You’re right,” Klaus said, picking up his rattle and giving it a halfhearted little shake. “We shouldn’t complain.”

“Twee!” Sunny shrieked, which probably meant something like “Both of you are right. We shouldn’t complain.”

Klaus walked over to the window and looked out at the darkening landscape. The sun was beginning to set over the inky depths of Lake Lachrymose, and a cold evening wind was beginning to blow. Even from the other side of the glass Klaus could feel a small chill. “I want to complain, anyway,” he said.

“Soup’s on!” Aunt Josephine called from the kitchen. “Please come to dinner!”

Violet put her hand on Klaus’s shoulder and gave it a little squeeze of comfort, and without another word the three Baudelaires headed back down the hallway and into the dining room. Aunt Josephine had set the table for four, providing a large cushion for Sunny and another pile of tin cans in the corner of the room, just in case burglars tried to steal their dinner.

“Normally, of course,” Aunt Josephine said, “‘soup’s on’ is an idiomatic expression that has nothing to do with soup. It simply means that dinner is ready. In this case, however, I’ve actually made soup.”

“Oh good,” Violet said. “There’s nothing like hot soup on a chilly evening.”

“Actually, it’s not hot soup,” Aunt Josephine said. “I never cook anything hot because I’m afraid of turning the stove on. It might burst into flames. I’ve made chilled cucumber soup for dinner.”

The Baudelaires looked at one another and tried to hide their dismay. As you probably know, chilled cucumber soup is a delicacy that is best enjoyed on a very hot day. I myself once enjoyed it in Egypt while visiting a friend of mine who works as a snake charmer. When it is well prepared, chilled cucumber soup has a delicious, minty taste, cool and refreshing as if you are drinking something as well as eating it. But on a cold day, in a drafty room, chilled cucumber soup is about as welcome as a swarm of wasps at a bat mitzvah. In dead silence, the three children sat down at the table with their Aunt Josephine and did their best to force down the cold, slimy concoction. The only sound was of Sunny's four teeth chattering on her soup spoon as she ate her frigid dinner. As I'm sure you know, when no one is speaking at the dinner table, the meal seems to take hours, so it felt like much, much later when Aunt Josephine broke the silence.

"My dear husband and I never had children," she said, "because we were afraid to. But I do want you to know that I'm very happy that you're here. I am often very lonely up on this hill by myself, and when Mr. Poe wrote to me about your troubles I didn't want you to be as lonely as I was when I lost my dear Ike."

"Was Ike your husband?" Violet asked.

Aunt Josephine smiled, but she didn't look at Violet, as if she were talking more to herself than to the Baudelaires. "Yes," she said, in a faraway voice, "he was my husband, but he was much more than that. He was my best friend, my partner in grammar, and the only person I knew who could whistle with crackers in his mouth."

"Our mother could do that," Klaus said, smiling. "Her specialty was Mozart's fourteenth symphony."

"Ike's was Beethoven's fourth quartet," Aunt Josephine replied. "Apparently it's a family characteristic."

"I'm sorry we never got to meet him," Violet said. "He sounds wonderful."

"He *was* wonderful," Aunt Josephine said, stirring her soup and blowing on it even though it was ice cold. "I was so sad when he died. I felt like I'd lost the two most special things in my life."

“Two?” Violet asked. “What do you mean?”

“I lost Ike,” Aunt Josephine said, “and I lost Lake Lachrymose. I mean, I didn’t really lose it, of course. It’s still down in the valley. But I grew up on its shores. I used to swim in it every day. I knew which beaches were sandy and which were rocky. I knew all the islands in the middle of its waters and all the caves alongside its shore. Lake Lachrymose felt like a friend to me. But when it took poor Ike away from me I was too afraid to go near it anymore. I stopped swimming in it. I never went to the beach again. I even put away all my books about it. The only way I can bear to look at it is from the Wide Window in the library.”

“Library?” Klaus asked, brightening. “You have a library?”

“Of course,” Aunt Josephine said. “Where else could I keep all my books on grammar? If you’ve all finished with your soup, I’ll show you the library.”

“I couldn’t eat another bite,” Violet said truthfully.

“Irm!” Sunny shrieked in agreement.

“No, no, Sunny,” Aunt Josephine said. “‘Irm’ is not grammatically correct. You mean to say, ‘I have also finished my supper.’”

“Irm,” Sunny insisted.

“My goodness, you do need grammar lessons,” Aunt Josephine said. “All the more reason to go to the library. Come, children.”

Leaving behind their half-full soup bowls, the Baudelaires followed Aunt Josephine down the hallway, taking care not to touch any of the doorknobs they passed. At the end of the hallway, Aunt Josephine stopped and opened an ordinary-looking door, but when the children stepped through the door they arrived in a room that was anything but ordinary.

The library was neither square nor rectangular, like most rooms, but curved in the shape of an oval. One wall of the oval was devoted to books

—rows and rows and rows of them, and every single one of them was about grammar. There was an encyclopedia of nouns placed in a series of simple wooden bookshelves, curved to fit the wall. There were very thick books on the history of verbs, lined up in metal bookshelves that were polished to a bright shine. And there were cabinets made of glass, with adjective manuals placed inside them as if they were for sale in a store instead of in someone's house. In the middle of the room were some comfortable-looking chairs, each with its own footstool so one could stretch out one's legs while reading.

But it was the other wall of the oval, at the far end of the room, that drew the children's attention. From floor to ceiling, the wall was a window, just one enormous curved pane of glass, and beyond the glass was a spectacular view of Lake Lachrymose. When the children stepped forward to take a closer look, they felt as if they were flying high above the dark lake instead of merely looking out on it.

"This is the only way I can stand to look at the lake," Aunt Josephine said in a quiet voice. "From far away. If I get much closer I remember my last picnic on the beach with my darling Ike. I warned him to wait an hour after eating before he went into the lake, but he only waited forty-five minutes. He thought that was enough."

"Did he get cramps?" Klaus asked. "That's what's supposed to happen if you don't wait an hour before you swim."

"That's one reason," Aunt Josephine said, "but in Lake Lachrymose, there's another one. If you don't wait an hour after eating, the Lachrymose Leeches will smell food on you, and attack."

"Leeches?" Violet asked.

"Leeches," Klaus explained, "are a bit like worms. They are blind and live in bodies of water, and in order to feed, they attach themselves to you and suck your blood."

Violet shuddered. "How horrible."

“Swoh!” Sunny shrieked, which probably meant something along the lines of “Why in the world would you go swimming in a lake full of leeches?”

“The Lachrymose Leeches,” Aunt Josephine said, “are quite different from regular leeches. They each have six rows of very sharp teeth, and one very sharp nose—they can smell even the smallest bit of food from far, far away. The Lachrymose Leeches are usually quite harmless, preying only on small fish. But if they smell food on a human they will swarm around him and—and…” Tears came to Aunt Josephine’s eyes, and she took out a pale pink handkerchief and dabbed them away. “I apologize, children. It is not grammatically correct to end a sentence with the word ‘and’, but I get so upset when I think about Ike that I cannot talk about his death.”

“We’re sorry we brought it up,” Klaus said quickly. “We didn’t mean to upset you.”

“That’s all right,” Aunt Josephine said, blowing her nose. “It’s just that I prefer to think of Ike in other ways. Ike always loved the sunshine, and I like to imagine that wherever he is now, it’s as sunny as can be. Of course, nobody knows what happens to you after you die, but it’s nice to think of my husband someplace very, very hot, don’t you think?”

“Yes I do,” Violet said. “It is very nice.” She swallowed. She wanted to say something else to Aunt Josephine, but when you have only known someone for a few hours it is difficult to know what they would like to hear. “Aunt Josephine,” she said timidly, “have you thought of moving someplace else? Perhaps if you lived somewhere far from Lake Lachrymose, you might feel better.”

“We’d go with you,” Klaus piped up.

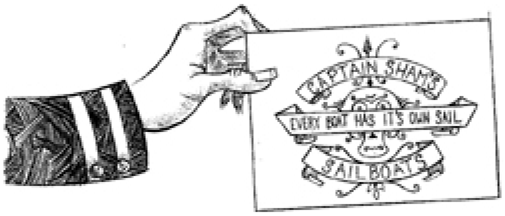
“Oh, I could never sell this house,” Aunt Josephine said. “I’m terrified of realtors.”

The three Baudelaire youngsters looked at one another surreptitiously, a word which here means “while Aunt Josephine wasn’t looking.” None of them had ever heard of a person who was frightened of realtors.

There are two kinds of fears: rational and irrational—or, in simpler terms, fears that make sense and fears that don't. For instance, the Baudelaire orphans have a fear of Count Olaf, which makes perfect sense, because he is an evil man who wants to destroy them. But if they were afraid of lemon meringue pie, this would be an irrational fear, because lemon meringue pie is delicious and has never hurt a soul. Being afraid of a monster under the bed is perfectly rational, because there may in fact be a monster under your bed at any time, ready to eat you all up, but a fear of realtors is an irrational fear. Realtors, as I'm sure you know, are people who assist in the buying and selling of houses. Besides occasionally wearing an ugly yellow coat, the worst a realtor can do to you is show you a house that you find ugly, and so it is completely irrational to be terrified of them.

As Violet, Klaus, and Sunny looked down at the dark lake and thought about their new lives with Aunt Josephine, they experienced a fear themselves, and even a worldwide expert on fear would have difficulty saying whether this was a rational fear or an irrational fear. The Baudelaires' fear was that misfortune would soon befall them. On one hand, this was an irrational fear, because Aunt Josephine seemed like a good person, and Count Olaf was nowhere to be seen. But on the other hand, the Baudelaires had experienced so many terrible things that it seemed rational to think that another catastrophe was just around the corner.

CHAPTER Three


CAPTAIN SHAM'S
EVERY BOAT HAS IT'S OWN SAIL
SAILBOATS

There is a way of looking at life called "keeping things in perspective." This simply means "making yourself feel better by comparing the things that are happening to you right now against other things that have happened at a different time, or to different people." For instance, if you were upset about an ugly pimple on the end of your nose, you might try to feel better by keeping your pimple in perspective. You might compare your pimple situation to that of someone who was being eaten by a bear, and when you looked in the mirror at your ugly pimple, you could say to yourself, "Well, at least I'm not being eaten by a bear."

You can see at once why keeping things in perspective rarely works very well, because it is hard to concentrate on somebody else being eaten by a bear when you are staring at your own ugly pimple. So it was with the Baudelaire orphans in the days that followed. In the morning, when the children joined Aunt Josephine for a breakfast of orange juice and untoasted bread, Violet thought to herself, "Well, at least we're not being forced to cook for Count Olaf's disgusting theater troupe." In the afternoon, when Aunt Josephine would take them to the library and teach them all about grammar, Klaus thought to himself, "Well, at least Count Olaf isn't about to whisk us away to Peru." And in the evening, when the children joined Aunt Josephine for a dinner of orange juice and untoasted bread, Sunny thought to herself, “Zax!” which meant something along the lines of “Well, at least there isn’t a sign of Count Olaf anywhere.”

But no matter how much the three siblings compared their life with Aunt Josephine to the miserable things that had happened to them before, they couldn’t help but be dissatisfied with their circumstances. In her free time, Violet would dismantle the gears and switches from the model train set, hoping to invent something that could prepare hot food without frightening Aunt Josephine, but she couldn’t help wishing that Aunt Josephine would simply turn on the stove. Klaus would sit in one of the chairs in the library with his feet on a footstool, reading about grammar until the sun went down, but when he looked out at the gloomy lake he couldn’t help wishing that they were still living with Uncle Monty and all of his reptiles. And Sunny would take time out from her schedule and bite the head of Pretty Penny, but she couldn’t help wishing that their parents were still alive and that she and her siblings were safe and sound in the Baudelaire home.

Aunt Josephine did not like to leave the house very much, because there were so many things outside that frightened her, but one day the children told her what the cabdriver had said about Hurricane Herman approaching, and she agreed to take them into town in order to buy groceries. Aunt Josephine was afraid to drive in automobiles, because the doors might get stuck, leaving her trapped inside, so they walked the long way down the hill. By the time the Baudelaires reached the market their legs were sore from the walk.

“Are you sure that you won’t let us cook for you?” Violet asked, as Aunt Josephine reached into the barrel of limes. “When we lived with Count Olaf, we learned how to make puttanesca sauce. It was quite easy and perfectly safe.”

Aunt Josephine shook her head. “It is my responsibility as your caretaker to cook for you, and I am eager to try this recipe for cold lime stew. Count Olaf certainly does sound evil. Imagine forcing children to stand near a stove!”

“He was very cruel to us,” Klaus agreed, not adding that being forced to cook had been the least of their problems when they lived with Count Olaf. “Sometimes I still have nightmares about the terrible tattoo on his ankle. It always scared me.”

Aunt Josephine frowned, and patted her bun. “I’m afraid you made a grammatical mistake, Klaus,” she said sternly. “When you said, ‘It always scared me,’ you sounded as if you meant that his ankle always scared you, but you meant his tattoo. So you should have said, ‘The tattoo always scared me.’ Do you understand?”

“Yes, I understand,” Klaus said, sighing. “Thank you for pointing that out, Aunt Josephine.”

“Niku!” Sunny shrieked, which probably meant something like “It wasn’t very nice to point out Klaus’s grammatical mistake when he was talking about something that upset him.”

“No, no, Sunny,” Aunt Josephine said firmly, looking up from her shopping list. “‘Niku’ isn’t a word. Remember what we said about using correct English. Now, Violet, would you please get some cucumbers? I thought I would make chilled cucumber soup again sometime next week.”

Violet groaned inwardly, a phrase which here means “said nothing but felt disappointed at the prospect of another chilly dinner,” but she smiled at Aunt Josephine and headed down an aisle of the market in search of cucumbers. She looked wistfully at all the delicious food on the shelves that required turning on the stove in order to prepare it. Violet hoped that someday she could cook a nice hot meal for Aunt Josephine and her siblings using the invention she was working on with the model train engine. For a few moments she was so lost in her inventing thoughts that she didn’t look where she was going until she walked right into someone.

“Excuse m—” Violet started to say, but when she looked up she couldn’t finish her sentence. There stood a tall, thin man with a blue sailor hat on his head and a black eye patch covering his left eye. He was smiling eagerly down at her as if she were a brightly wrapped birthday present that he couldn’t wait to rip open. His fingers were long and bony, and he was leaning awkwardly to one side, a bit like Aunt Josephine's house dangling over the hill. When Violet looked down, she saw why: There was a thick stump of wood where his left leg should have been, and like most people with peg legs, this man was leaning on his good leg, which caused him to tilt. But even though Violet had never seen anyone with a peg leg before, this was not why she couldn't finish her sentence. The reason why had to do with something she *had* seen before—the bright, bright shine in the man's one eye, and above it, just one long eyebrow.

When someone is in disguise, and the disguise is not very good, one can describe it as a transparent disguise. This does not mean that the person is wearing plastic wrap or glass or anything else transparent. It merely means that people can see through his disguise—that is, the disguise doesn't fool them for a minute. Violet wasn't fooled for even a second as she stood staring at the man she'd walked into. She knew at once it was Count Olaf.

"Violet, what are you doing in this aisle?" Aunt Josephine said, walking up behind her. "This aisle contains food that needs to be heated, and you know—" When she saw Count Olaf she stopped speaking, and for a second Violet thought that Aunt Josephine had recognized him, too. But then Aunt Josephine smiled, and Violet's hopes were dashed, a word which here means "shattered."

"Hello," Count Olaf said, smiling at Aunt Josephine. "I was just apologizing for running into your sister here."

Aunt Josephine's face grew bright red, seeming even brighter under her white hair. "Oh, no," she said, as Klaus and Sunny came down the aisle to see what all the fuss was about. "Violet is not my sister, sir. I am her legal guardian."

Count Olaf clapped one hand to his face as if Aunt Josephine had just told him she was the tooth fairy. "I cannot believe it," he said. "Madam, you don't look nearly old enough to be anyone's guardian."

Aunt Josephine blushed again. "Well, sir, I have lived by the lake my whole life, and some people have told me that it keeps me looking youthful."

“I would be happy to have the acquaintance of a local personage,” Count Olaf said, tipping his blue sailor hat and using a silly word which here means “person.” “I am new to this town, and beginning a new business, so I am eager to make new acquaintances. Allow me to introduce myself.”

“Klaus and I are happy to introduce you,” Violet said, with more bravery than I would have had when faced with meeting Count Olaf again. “Aunt Josephine, this is Count—”

“No, no, Violet,” Aunt Josephine interrupted. “Watch your grammar. You should have said ‘Klaus and I *will be* happy to introduce you,’ because you haven’t introduced us yet.”

“But—” Violet started to say.

“Now, Veronica,” Count Olaf said, his one eye shining brightly as he looked down at her. “Your guardian is right. And before you make any other mistakes, allow me to introduce myself. My name is Captain Sham, and I have a new business renting sailboats out on Damocles Dock. I am happy to make your acquaintance, Miss—?”

“I am Josephine Anwhistle,” Aunt Josephine said. “And these are Violet, Klaus, and little Sunny Baudelaire.”

“Little Sunny,” Captain Sham repeated, sounding as if he were eating Sunny rather than greeting her. “It’s a pleasure to meet all of you. Perhaps someday I can take you out on the lake for a little boat ride.”

“Ging!” Sunny shrieked, which probably meant something like “I would rather eat dirt.”

“We’re not going anywhere with you,” Klaus said.

Aunt Josephine blushed again, and looked sharply at the three children. “The children seem to have forgotten their manners as well as their grammar,” she said. “Please apologize to Captain Sham at once.”

“He’s not Captain Sham,” Violet said impatiently. “He’s Count Olaf.”

Aunt Josephine gasped, and looked from the anxious faces of the Baudelaires to the calm face of Captain Sham. He had a grin on his face, but his smile had slipped a notch, a phrase which here means “grown less confident as he waited to see if Aunt Josephine realized he was really Count Olaf in disguise.”

Aunt Josephine looked him over from head to toe, and then frowned. “Mr. Poe told me to be on the watch for Count Olaf,” she said finally, “but he did also say that you children tended to see him everywhere.”

“We see him everywhere,” Klaus said tiredly, “because he *is* everywhere.”

“Who is this Count Omar person?” Captain Sham asked.

“Count *Olaf*,” Aunt Josephine said, “is a terrible man who—”

“—is standing right in front of us,” Violet finished. “I don’t care what he calls himself. He has the same shiny eyes, the same single eyebrow—”

“But plenty of people have those characteristics,” Aunt Josephine said. “Why, my mother-in-law had not only one eyebrow, but also only one ear.”

“The tattoo!” Klaus said. “Look for the tattoo! Count Olaf has a tattoo of an eye on his left ankle.”

Captain Sham sighed, and, with difficulty, lifted his peg leg so everyone could get a clear look at it. It was made of dark wood that was polished to shine as brightly as his eye, and attached to his left knee with a curved metal hinge. “But I don’t even have a left ankle,” he said, in a whiny voice. “It was all chewed away by the Lachrymose Leeches.”

Aunt Josephine’s eyes welled up, and she placed a hand on Captain Sham’s shoulder. “Oh, you poor man,” she said, and the children knew at once that they were doomed. “Did you hear what Captain Sham said?” she asked them.

Violet tried one more time, knowing it would probably be futile, a word which here means “filled with futility.” “He’s not Captain Sham,” she said. “He’s—”

“You don’t think he would allow the Lachrymose Leeches to chew off his leg,” Aunt Josephine said, “just to play a prank on you? Tell us, Captain Sham. Tell us how it happened.”

“Well, I was sitting on my boat, just a few weeks ago,” Captain Sham said. “I was eating some pasta with puttanesca sauce, and I spilled some on my leg. Before I knew it, the leeches were attacking.”

“That’s just how it happened with my husband,” Aunt Josephine said, biting her lip. The Baudelaires, all three of them, clenched their fists in frustration. They knew that Captain Sham’s story about the puttanesca sauce was as phony as his name, but they couldn’t prove it.

“Here,” Captain Sham said, pulling a small card out of his pocket and handing it to Aunt Josephine. “Take my business card, and next time you’re in town perhaps we could enjoy a cup of tea.”

“That sounds delightful,” Aunt Josephine said, reading his card. “‘Captain Sham’s Sailboats. Every boat has it’s own sail.’ Oh, Captain, you have made a very serious grammatical error here.”

“What?” Captain Sham said, raising his eyebrow.

“This card says ‘it’s,’ with an apostrophe. I-T-apostrophe-S always means ‘it is.’ You don’t mean to say ‘Every boat has it is own sail.’ You mean simply I-T-S, ‘belonging to it.’ It’s a very common mistake, Captain Sham, but a dreadful one.”

Captain Sham’s face darkened, and it looked for a minute like he was going to raise his peg leg again and kick Aunt Josephine with all his might. But then he smiled and his face cleared. “Thank you for pointing that out,” he said finally.

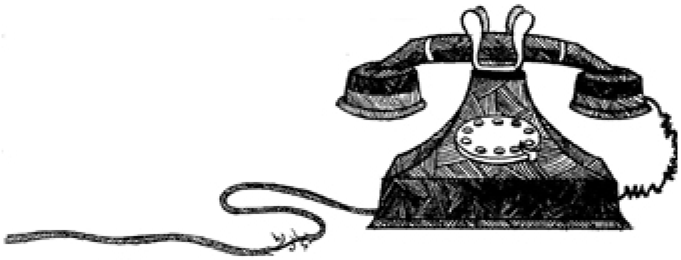
“You’re welcome,” Aunt Josephine said. “Come, children, it’s time to pay for our groceries. I hope to see you soon, Captain Sham.”

Captain Sham smiled and waved good-bye, but the Baudelaires watched as his smile turned to a sneer as soon as Aunt Josephine had turned her back. He had fooled her, and there was nothing the Baudelaires could do about it. They spent the rest of the afternoon trudging back up the hill carrying their groceries, but the heaviness of cucumbers and limes was nothing compared to the heaviness in the orphans’ hearts. All the way up the hill, Aunt Josephine talked about Captain Sham and what a nice man he was and how much she hoped they would see him again, while the children knew he was really Count Olaf and a terrible man and hoped they would never see him for the rest of their lives.

There is an expression that, I am sad to say, is appropriate for this part of the story. The expression is “falling for something hook, line, and sinker,” and it comes from the world of fishing. The hook, the line, and the sinker are all parts of a fishing rod, and they work together to lure fish out of the ocean to their doom. If somebody is falling for something hook, line, and sinker, they are believing a bunch of lies and may find themselves doomed as a result. Aunt Josephine was falling for Captain Sham’s lies hook, line, and sinker, but it was Violet, Klaus, and Sunny who were feeling doomed. As they walked up the hill in silence, the children looked down at Lake Lachrymose and felt the chill of doom fall over their hearts. It made the three siblings feel cold and lost, as if they were not simply looking at the shadowy lake, but had been dropped into the middle of its depths.

CHAPTER
Four

That night, the Baudelaire children sat at the table with Aunt Josephine and ate their dinner with a cold pit in their stomachs. Half of the pit came from the chilled lime stew that Aunt Josephine had prepared. But the other half—if not more than half—came from the knowledge that Count Olaf was in their lives once again.



“That Captain Sham is certainly a charming person,” Aunt Josephine said, putting a piece of lime rind in her mouth. “He must be very lonely, moving to a new town and losing a leg. Maybe we could have him over for dinner.”

“We keep trying to tell you, Aunt Josephine,” Violet said, pushing the stew around on her plate so it would look like she’d eaten more than she actually had. “He’s not Captain Sham. He’s Count Olaf in disguise.”

“I’ve had enough of this nonsense,” Aunt Josephine said. “Mr. Poe told me that Count Olaf had a tattoo on his left ankle and one eyebrow over his eyes. Captain Sham doesn't have a left ankle and only has one eye. I can't believe you would dare to disagree with a man who has eye problems."

"I have eye problems," Klaus said, pointing to his glasses, "and you're disagreeing with me."

"I will thank you not to be impertinent," Aunt Josephine said, using a word which here means "pointing out that I'm wrong, which annoys me." "It is very annoying. You will have to accept, once and for all, that Captain Sham is *not* Count Olaf." She reached into her pocket and pulled out the business card. "Look at his card. Does it say Count Olaf? No. It says Captain Sham. The card does have a serious grammatical error on it, but it is nevertheless proof that Captain Sham is who he says he is."

Aunt Josephine put the business card down on the dinner table, and the Baudelaires looked at it and sighed. Business cards, of course, are not proof of anything. Anyone can go to a print shop and have cards made that say anything they like. The king of Denmark can order business cards that say he sells golf balls. Your dentist can order business cards that say she is your grandmother. In order to escape from the castle of an enemy of mine, I once had cards printed that said I was an admiral in the French navy. Just because something is typed—whether it is typed on a business card or typed in a newspaper or book—this does not mean that it is true. The three siblings were well aware of this simple fact but could not find the words to convince Aunt Josephine. So they merely looked at Aunt Josephine, sighed, and silently pretended to eat their stew.

It was so quiet in the dining room that everyone jumped—Violet, Klaus, Sunny, and even Aunt Josephine—when the telephone rang. "My goodness!" Aunt Josephine said. "What should we do?"

"Minka!" Sunny shrieked, which probably meant something like "Answer it, of course!"

Aunt Josephine stood up from the table, but didn't move even as the phone rang a second time. "It might be important," she said, "but I don't know if it's worth the risk of electrocution."

“If it makes you feel more comfortable,” Violet said, wiping her mouth with her napkin, “I will answer the phone.” Violet stood up and walked to the phone in time to answer it on the third ring.

“Hello?” she asked.

“Is this Mrs. Anwhistle?” a wheezy voice asked.

“No,” Violet replied. “This is Violet Baudelaire. May I help you?”

“Put the old woman on the phone, orphan,” the voice said, and Violet froze, realizing it was Captain Sham. Quickly, she stole a glance at Aunt Josephine, who was now watching Violet nervously.

“I’m sorry,” Violet said into the phone. “You must have the wrong number.”

“Don’t play with me, you wretched girl—” Captain Sham started to say, but Violet hung up the phone, her heart pounding, and turned to Aunt Josephine.

“Someone was asking for the Hopalong Dancing School,” she said, lying quickly. “I told them they had the wrong number.”

“What a brave girl you are,” Aunt Josephine murmured. “Picking up the phone like that.”

“It’s actually very safe,” Violet said.

“Haven’t you ever answered the phone, Aunt Josephine?” Klaus asked.

“Ike almost always answered it,” Aunt Josephine said, “and he used a special glove for safety. But now that I’ve seen you answer it, maybe I’ll give it a try next time somebody calls.”

The phone rang, and Aunt Josephine jumped again. “Goodness,” she said, “I didn’t think it would ring again so soon. What an adventurous evening!”

Violet stared at the phone, knowing it was Captain Sham calling back. “Would you like me to answer it again?” she asked.

“No, no,” Aunt Josephine said, walking toward the small ringing phone as if it were a big barking dog. “I said I’d try it, and I will.” She took a deep breath, reached out a nervous hand, and picked up the phone.

“Hello?” she said. “Yes, this is she. Oh, hello, Captain Sham. How lovely to hear your voice.” Aunt Josephine listened for a moment, and then blushed bright red. “Well, that’s very nice of you to say, Captain Sham, but—what? Oh, all right. That’s very nice of you to say, *Julio*. What? What? Oh, what a lovely idea. But please hold on one moment.”

Aunt Josephine held a hand over the receiver and faced the three children. “Violet, Klaus, Sunny, please go to your room,” she said. “Captain Sham—I mean Julio, he asked me to call him by his first name—is planning a surprise for you children, and he wants to discuss it with me.”

“We don’t want a surprise,” Klaus said.

“Of course you do,” Aunt Josephine said. “Now run along so I can discuss it without your eavesdropping.”

“We’re not eavesdropping,” Violet said, “but I think it would be better if we stayed here.”

“Perhaps you are confused about the meaning of the word ‘eavesdropping,’” Aunt Josephine said. “It means ‘listening in.’ If you stay here, you will be eavesdropping. Please go to your room.”

“We *know* what eavesdropping means,” Klaus said, but he followed his sisters down the hallway to their room. Once inside, they looked at one another in silent frustration. Violet put aside pieces of the toy caboose that she had planned to examine that evening to make room on her bed for the three of them to lie beside one another and frown at the ceiling.

“I thought we’d be safe here,” Violet said glumly. “I thought that anybody who was frightened of realtors would never be friendly to Count

Olaf, no matter how he was disguised.”

“Do you think that he actually let leeches chew off his leg,” Klaus wondered, shuddering, “just to hide his tattoo?”

“Choin!” Sunny shrieked, which probably meant “That seems a little drastic, even for Count Olaf.”

“I agree with Sunny,” Violet said. “I think he told that tale about leeches just to make Aunt Josephine feel sorry for him.”

“And it sure worked,” Klaus said, sighing. “After he told her that sob story, she fell for his disguise hook, line, and sinker.”

“At least she isn’t as trusting as Uncle Monty,” Violet pointed out. “He let Count Olaf move right into the house.”

“At least then we could keep an eye on him,” Klaus replied.

“Ober!” Sunny remarked, which meant something along the lines of “Although we still didn’t save Uncle Monty.”

“What do you think he’s up to this time?” Violet asked. “Maybe he plans to take us out in one of his boats and drown us in the lake.”

“Maybe he wants to push this whole house off the mountain,” Klaus said, “and blame it on Hurricane Herman.”

“Haftu!” Sunny said glumly, which probably meant something like “Maybe he wants to put the Lachrymose Leeches in our beds.”

“Maybe, maybe, maybe,” Violet said. “All these maybes won’t get us anywhere.”

“We could call Mr. Poe and tell him Count Olaf is here,” Klaus said. “Maybe he could come and fetch us.”

“That’s the biggest maybe of them all,” Violet said. “It’s always impossible to convince Mr. Poe of anything, and Aunt Josephine doesn’t believe us even though she saw Count Olaf with her own eyes."

"She doesn't even think she saw Count Olaf," Klaus agreed sadly. "She thinks she saw *Captain Sham*."

Sunny nibbled halfheartedly on Pretty Penny's head and muttered "Poch!" which probably meant "You mean *Julio*."

"Then I don't see what we can do," Klaus said, "except keep our eyes and ears open."

"Doma," Sunny agreed.

"You're both right," Violet said. "We'll just have to keep a very careful watch."

The Baudelaire orphans nodded solemnly, but the cold pit in their stomachs had not gone away. They all felt that keeping watch wasn't really much of a plan for defending themselves from Captain Sham, and as it grew later and later it worried them more and more. Violet tied her hair up in a ribbon to keep it out of her eyes, as if she were inventing something, but she thought and thought for hours and hours and was unable to invent another plan. Klaus stared at the ceiling with the utmost concentration, as if something very interesting were written on it, but nothing helpful occurred to him as the hour grew later and later. And Sunny bit Pretty Penny's head over and over, but no matter how long she bit it she couldn't think of anything to ease the Baudelaires' worries.

I have a friend named Gina-Sue who is socialist, and Gina-Sue has a favorite saying: "You can't lock up the barn after the horses are gone." It means simply that sometimes even the best of plans will occur to you when it is too late. This, I'm sorry to say, is the case with the Baudelaire orphans and their plan to keep a close watch on Captain Sham, for after hours and hours of worrying they heard an enormous crash of shattering glass, and knew at once that keeping watch hadn't been a good enough plan.

"What was that noise?" Violet said, getting up off the bed.

“It sounded like breaking glass,” Klaus said worriedly, walking toward the bedroom door.

“Vestu!” Sunny shrieked, but her siblings did not have time to figure out what she meant as they all hurried down the hallway.

“Aunt Josephine! Aunt Josephine!” Violet called, but there was no answer. She peered up and down the hallway, but everything was quiet. “Aunt Josephine!” she called again. Violet led the way as the three orphans ran into the dining room, but their guardian wasn’t there either. The candles on the table were still lit, casting a flickering glow on the business card and the bowls of cold lime stew.

“Aunt Josephine!” Violet called again, and the children ran back out to the hallway and toward the door of the library. As she ran, Violet couldn’t help but remember how she and her siblings had called Uncle Monty’s name, early one morning, just before discovering the tragedy that had befallen him. “Aunt Josephine!” she called. “Aunt Josephine!” She couldn’t help but remember all the times she had woken up in the middle of the night, calling out the names of her parents as she dreamed, as she so often did, of the terrible fire that had claimed their lives. “Aunt Josephine!” she said, reaching the library door. Violet was afraid that she was calling out Aunt Josephine’s name when her aunt could no longer hear it.

“Look,” Klaus said, and pointed to the door. A piece of paper, folded in half, was attached to the wood with a thumbtack. Klaus pried the paper loose and unfolded it.

“What is it?” Violet asked, and Sunny craned her little neck to see.

“It’s a note,” Klaus said, and read it out loud:

Violet, Klaus, and Sunny—

By the time you read this note, my life will be at

it’s end. My heart is as cold as Ike and I find *life inbearable. I know your children may not*

understand the sad life of a dowadger, or

what would have leaded me to this desperate akt,

but please know that I am much happier this

way. As my last will and testament, I leave you

three in the care of Captain Sham, a kind and

honorable men. Please think of me kindly even

though I'd done this terrible thing.

—Your Aunt Josephine

“Oh no,” Klaus said quietly when he was finished reading. He turned the piece of paper over and over as if he had read it incorrectly, as if it said something different. “Oh no,” he said again, so faintly that it was as if he didn't even know he was speaking out loud.

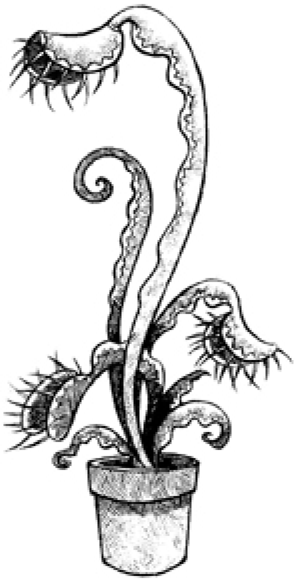
Without a word Violet opened the door to the library, and the Baudelaires took a step inside and found themselves shivering. The room was freezing cold, and after one glance the orphans knew why. The Wide Window had shattered. Except for a few shards that still stuck to the window frame, the enormous pane of glass was gone, leaving a vacant hole that looked out into the still blackness of the night.

The cold night air rushed through the hole, rattling the bookshelves and making the children shiver up against one another, but despite the cold the orphans walked carefully to the empty space where the window had been, and looked down. The night was so black that it seemed as if there was absolutely nothing beyond the window. Violet, Klaus, and Sunny stood there for a moment and remembered the fear they had felt, just a few days ago, when they were standing in this very same spot. They knew now that their fear had been rational. Huddling together, looking down into the blackness, the Baudelaires knew that their plan to keep a careful watch had come too late. They had locked the barn door, but poor Aunt Josephine was already gone.

CHAPTER
Five

Violet, Klaus, and Sunny—By the time you read this note, my life will be at it's end. My heart is as cold as Ike and I find life inbearable. I know your children may not understand the sad life of a dowadger, or what would have leaded me to this desperate akt, but please know that I am much happier this way. As my last will and testament, I leave you three in the care of Captain Sham, a kind and honorable men. Please think of me kindly even though I'd done this terrible thing.

—Your Aunt Josephine



“*Stop it*!” Violet cried. “Stop reading it out loud, Klaus! We already know what it says.”

“I just can’t believe it,” Klaus said, turning the paper around for the umpteenth time. The Baudelaire orphans were sitting glumly around the dining-room table with the cold lime stew in bowls and dread in their hearts. Violet had called Mr. Poe and told him what had happened, and the Baudelaires, too anxious to sleep, had stayed up the whole night waiting for him to arrive on the first Fickle Ferry of the day. The candles were almost completely burned down, and Klaus had to lean forward to read Josephine’s note. “There’s something funny about this note, but I can’t put my finger on it.”

“How can you say such a thing?” Violet asked. “Aunt Josephine has thrown herself out of the window. There’s nothing funny about it at all.”

“Not funny as in a funny joke,” Klaus said. “Funny as in a funny smell. Why, in the very first sentence she says ‘my life will be at it’s end.’”

“And now it is,” Violet said, shuddering.

“That’s not what I mean,” Klaus said impatiently. “She uses it’s, I-T-apostrophe-S, which always means ‘it is.’ But you wouldn’t say ‘my life will be at it is end.’ She means I-T-S, ‘belonging to it.’” He picked up Captain Sham’s business card, which was still lying on the table. “Remember when she saw this card? ‘Every boat has it’s own sail.’ She said it was a serious grammatical error.”

“Who cares about grammatical errors,” Violet asked, “when Aunt Josephine has jumped out the window?”

“But Aunt Josephine would have cared,” Klaus pointed out. “That’s what she cared about most: grammar. Remember, she said it was the greatest joy in life.”

“Well, it wasn’t enough,” Violet said sadly. “No matter how much she liked grammar, it says she found her life unbearable.”

"But that's another error in the note," Klaus said. "It doesn't say *un*bearable, with a U. It says *in*bearable, with an I."

"*You* are being unbearable, with a U," Violet cried.

"And *you* are being stupid, with an S," Klaus snapped.

"Aget!" Sunny shrieked, which meant something along the lines of "Please stop fighting!" Violet and Klaus looked at their baby sister and then at one another. Oftentimes, when people are miserable, they will want to make other people miserable, too. But it never helps.

"I'm sorry, Klaus," Violet said meekly. "You're not unbearable. Our situation is unbearable."

"I know," Klaus said miserably. "I'm sorry, too. You're not stupid, Violet. You're very clever. In fact, I hope you're clever enough to get us out of this situation. Aunt Josephine has jumped out the window and left us in the care of Captain Sham, and I don't know what we can do about it."

"Well, Mr. Poe is on his way," Violet said. "He said on the phone that he would be here first thing in the morning, so we don't have long to wait. Maybe Mr. Poe can be of some help."

"I guess so," Klaus said, but he and his sisters looked at one another and sighed. They knew that the chances of Mr. Poe being of much help were rather slim. When the Baudelaires lived with Count Olaf, Mr. Poe was not helpful when the children told him about Count Olaf's cruelty. When the Baudelaires lived with Uncle Monty, Mr. Poe was not helpful when the children told him about Count Olaf's treachery. It seemed clear that Mr. Poe would not be of any help in this situation, either.

One of the candles burned out in a small puff of smoke, and the children sank down lower in their chairs. You probably know of a plant called the Venus flytrap, which grows in the tropics. The top of the plant is shaped like an open mouth, with toothlike spines around the edges. When a fly, attracted by the smell of the flower, lands on the Venus flytrap, the mouth of the plant begins to close, trapping the fly. The terrified fly buzzes around the closed mouth of the plant, but there is nothing it can do, and the plant slowly, slowly, dissolves the fly into nothing. As the darkness of the house closed in around them, the Baudelaire youngsters felt like the fly in this situation. It was as if the disastrous fire that took the lives of their parents had been the beginning of a trap, and they hadn't even known it. They buzzed from place to place—Count Olaf's house in the city, Uncle Monty's home in the country, and now, Aunt Josephine's house overlooking the lake—but their own misfortune always closed around them, tighter and tighter, and it seemed to the three siblings that before too long they would dissolve away to nothing.

"We could rip up the note," Klaus said finally. "Then Mr. Poe wouldn't know about Aunt Josephine's wishes, and we wouldn't end up with Captain Sham."

"But I already told Mr. Poe that Aunt Josephine left a note," Violet said.

"Well, we could do a forgery," Klaus said, using a word which here means "write something yourself and pretend somebody else wrote it." "We'll write everything she wrote, but we'll leave out the part about Captain Sham."

"Aha!" Sunny shrieked. This word was a favorite of Sunny's, and unlike most of her words, it needed no translation. What Sunny meant was "Aha!", an expression of discovery.

"Of course!" Violet cried. "That's what Captain Sham did! *He* wrote this letter, not Aunt Josephine!"

Behind his glasses, Klaus's eyes lit up. "That explains *it's*!"

"That explains *inbearable*!" Violet said.

"Leep!" Sunny shrieked, which probably meant "Captain Sham threw Aunt Josephine out the window and then wrote this note to hide his crime."

"What a terrible thing to do," Klaus said, shuddering as he thought of Aunt Josephine falling into the lake she feared so much.

“Imagine the terrible things he will do to us,” Violet said, “if we don’t expose his crime. I can’t wait until Mr. Poe gets here so we can tell him what happened.”

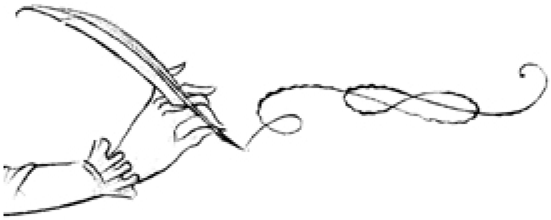
With perfect timing, the doorbell rang, and the Baudelaires hurried to answer it. Violet led her siblings down the hallway, looking wistfully at the radiator as she remembered how afraid of it Aunt Josephine was. Klaus followed closely behind, touching each doorknob gently in memory of Aunt Josephine’s warnings about them shattering into pieces. And when they reached the door, Sunny looked mournfully at the welcome mat that Aunt Josephine thought could cause someone to break their neck. Aunt Josephine had been so careful to avoid anything that she thought might harm her, but harm had still come her way.

Violet opened the peeling white door, and there stood Mr. Poe in the gloomy light of dawn. “Mr. Poe,” Violet said. She intended to tell him immediately of their forgery theory, but as soon as she saw him, standing in the doorway with a white handkerchief in one hand and a black briefcase in the other, her words stuck in her throat. Tears are curious things, for like earthquakes or puppet shows they can occur at any time, without any warning and without any good reason. “Mr. Poe,” Violet said again, and without any warning she and her siblings burst into tears. Violet cried, her shoulders shaking with sobs, and Klaus cried, the tears making his glasses slip down his nose, and Sunny cried, her open mouth revealing her four teeth. Mr. Poe put down his briefcase and put away his handkerchief. He was not very good at comforting people, but he put his arms around the children the best he could, and murmured “There, there,” which is a phrase some people murmur to comfort other people despite the fact that it doesn’t really mean anything.

Mr. Poe couldn’t think of anything else to say that might have comforted the Baudelaire orphans, but I wish now that I had the power to go back in time and speak to these three sobbing children. If I could, I could tell the Baudelaires that like earthquakes and puppet shows, their tears were occurring not only without warning but without good reason. The youngsters were crying, of course, because they thought Aunt Josephine was dead, and I wish I had the power to go back and tell them that they were wrong. But of course, I cannot. I am not on top of the hill, overlooking Lake Lachrymose, on that gloomy morning. I am sitting in my room, in the middle of the night, writing down this story and looking out my window at the graveyard behind my home. I cannot tell the Baudelaire orphans that they are wrong, but I can tell you, as the orphans cry in Mr. Poe’s arms, that Aunt Josephine is not dead.

Not yet.

CHAPTER
Six



Mr. Poe frowned, sat down at the table, and took out his handkerchief. “Forgery?” he repeated. The Baudelaire orphans had shown him the shattered window in the library. They had shown him the note that had been thumbtacked to the door. And they had shown him the business card with the grammatical mistake on it. “Forgery is a very serious charge,” he said sternly, and blew his nose.

“Not as serious as murder,” Klaus pointed out. “And that’s what Captain Sham did. He murdered Aunt Josephine and forged a note.”

“But why would this Captain Sham person,” Mr. Poe asked, “go to all this trouble just to place you under his care?”

“We’ve already told you,” Violet said, trying to hide her impatience. “Captain Sham is really Count Olaf in disguise.”

“These are very serious accusations,” Mr. Poe said firmly. “I understand that the three of you have had some terrible experiences, and I hope you’re not letting your imagination get the best of you. Remember when you lived with Uncle Monty? You were convinced that his assistant, Stephano, was really Count Olaf in disguise.”

“But Stephano *was* Count Olaf in disguise,” Klaus exclaimed.

“That’s not the point,” Mr. Poe said. “The point is that you can’t jump to conclusions. If you really think this note is a forgery, then we have to stop talking about disguises and do an investigation. Somewhere in this house, I’m sure we can find something that your Aunt Josephine has written. We can compare the handwriting and see if this note matches up.”

The Baudelaire orphans looked at one another. “Of course,” Klaus said. “If the note we found on the library door doesn’t match Aunt Josephine’s handwriting, then it was obviously written by somebody else. We didn’t think of that.”

Mr. Poe smiled. “You see? You are very intelligent children, but even the most intelligent people in the world often need the help of a banker. Now, where can we find a sample of Aunt Josephine’s handwriting?”

“In the kitchen,” Violet said promptly. “She left her shopping list in the kitchen when we got home from the market.”

“Chuni!” Sunny shrieked, which probably meant “Let’s go to the kitchen and get it,” and that’s exactly what they did. Aunt Josephine’s kitchen was very small and had a large white sheet covering the stove and the oven—for safety, Aunt Josephine had explained, during her tour. There was a countertop where she prepared the food, a refrigerator where she stored the food, and a sink where she washed away the food nobody had eaten. To one side of the countertop was a small piece of paper on which Aunt Josephine had made her list, and Violet crossed the kitchen to retrieve it. Mr. Poe turned on the lights, and Violet held the shopping list up to the note to see if they matched.

There are men and women who are experts in the field of handwriting analysis. They are called graphologists, and they attend graphological schools in order to get their degree in graphology. You might think that this situation would call for a graphologist, but there are times when an expert’s opinion is unnecessary. For instance, if a friend of yours brought you her pet dog, and said she was concerned because it wasn’t laying eggs, you would not have to be a veterinarian to tell her that dogs do not lay eggs and so there was nothing to worry about.

Yes, there are some questions that are so simple that anyone can answer them, and Mr. Poe and the Baudelaire orphans instantly knew the answer to the question “Does the handwriting on the shopping list match the handwriting on the note?” The answer was yes. When Aunt Josephine had written “Vinegar” on the shopping list, she had curved the tips of the V into tiny spirals—the same spirals that decorated the tips of the V in “Violet,” on the note. When she had written “Cucumbers” on the shopping list, the Cs were slightly squiggly, like earthworms, and the same earthworms appeared in the words “cold” and “Captain Sham” on the note. When Aunt Josephine had written “Limes” on the shopping list, the *i* was dotted with an oval rather than a circle, just as it was in “my life will be at it’s end.” There was no doubt that Aunt Josephine had written on both the pieces of paper that Mr. Poe and the Baudelaires were examining.

“I don’t think there’s any doubt that Aunt Josephine wrote on both these pieces of paper,” Mr. Poe said.

“But—” Violet began.

“There are no buts about it,” Mr. Poe said. “Look at the curvy V’s. Look at the squiggly C’s. Look at the oval dots over the I’s. I’m no graphologist, but I can certainly tell that these were written by the same person.”

“You’re right,” Klaus said miserably. “I know that Captain Sham is behind this somehow, but Aunt Josephine definitely wrote this note.”

“And that,” Mr. Poe said, “makes it a legal document.”

“Does that mean we have to live with Captain Sham?” Violet asked, her heart sinking.

“I’m afraid so,” Mr. Poe replied. “Someone’s last will and testament is an official statement of the wishes of the deceased. You were placed in Aunt Josephine’s care, so she had the right to assign you to a new caretaker before she leaped out the window. It is very shocking, certainly, but it is entirely legal.”

“We won’t go live with him,” Klaus said fiercely. “He’s the worst person on earth.”

“He’ll do something terrible, I know it,” Violet said. “All he’s after is the Baudelaire fortune.”

“Gind!” Sunny shrieked, which meant something like “Please don’t make us live with this evil man.”

“I know you don’t like this Captain Sham person,” Mr. Poe said, “but there’s not much I can do about it. I’m afraid the law says that that’s where you’ll go.”

“We’ll run away,” Klaus said.

“You will do nothing of the kind,” Mr. Poe said sternly. “Your parents entrusted me to see that you would be cared for properly. You want to honor your parents’ wishes, don’t you?”

“Well, yes,” Violet said, “but—”

“Then please don’t make a fuss,” Mr. Poe said. “Think of what your poor mother and father would say if they knew you were threatening to run away from your guardian.”

The Baudelaire parents, of course, would have been horrified to learn that their children were to be in the care of Captain Sham, but before the children could say this to Mr. Poe, he had moved on to other matters. “Now, I think the easiest thing to do would be to meet with Captain Sham and go over some details. Where is his business card? I’ll phone him now.”

“On the table, in the dining room,” Klaus said glumly, and Mr. Poe left the kitchen to make the call. The Baudelaires looked at Aunt Josephine’s shopping list and the suicide note.

“I just can’t believe it,” Violet said. “I was sure we were on the right track with the forgery idea.”

“Me too,” Klaus said. “Captain Sham has done something here—I *know* he has—but he’s been even sneakier than usual.”

“We’d better be smarter than usual, then,” Violet replied, “because we’ve got to convince Mr. Poe before it’s too late.”

“Well, Mr. Poe said he had to go over some details,” Klaus said. “Perhaps that will take a long time.”

“I got ahold of Captain Sham,” Mr. Poe said, coming back into the kitchen. “He was shocked to hear of Aunt Josephine’s death but overjoyed at the prospect of raising you children. We’re meeting him in a half hour for lunch at a restaurant in town, and after lunch we’ll go over the details of your adoption. By tonight you should be staying in his house. I’m sure you’re relieved that this can be sorted out so quickly.”

Violet and Sunny stared at Mr. Poe, too dismayed to speak. Klaus was silent too, but he was staring hard at something else. He was staring at Aunt Josephine’s note. His eyes were focused in concentration behind his glasses as he stared and stared at it, without blinking. Mr. Poe took his white handkerchief out of his pocket and coughed into it at great length and with great gusto, a word which here means “in a way which produced a great deal of phlegm.” But none of the Baudelaires said a word.

“Well,” Mr. Poe said finally, “I will call for a taxicab. There’s no use walking down that enormous hill. You children comb your hair and put your coats on. It’s very windy out and it’s getting cold. I think a storm might be approaching.”

Mr. Poe left to make his phone call, and the Baudelaires trudged to their room. Rather than comb their hair, however, Sunny and Violet immediately turned to Klaus. “What?” Violet asked him.

“*What* what?” Klaus answered.

“Don’t give me that *what* what,” Violet answered. “You’ve figured something out, that’s *what* what. I know you have. You were rereading Aunt

Josephine's note for the umpteenth time, but you had an expression as if you had just figured something out. Now, what is it?"

"I'm not sure," Klaus said, looking over the note one more time. "I might have begun figuring something out. Something that could help us. But I need more time."

"But we don't have any time!" Violet cried.

"We're going to have lunch with Captain Sham *right now*!"

"Then we're going to have to make some more time, somehow," Klaus said determinedly.

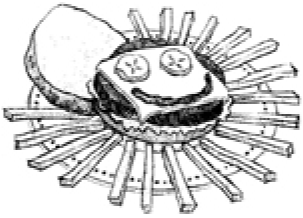
"Come on, children!" Mr. Poe called from the hallway. "The cab will be here any minute! Get your coats and let's go!"

Violet sighed, but went to the closet and took out all three Baudelaire coats. She handed Klaus his coat, and buttoned Sunny into her coat as she talked to her brother. "How can we make more time?" Violet asked.

"You're the inventor," Klaus answered, buttoning his coat.

"But you can't invent things like time," Violet said. "You can invent things like automatic popcorn poppers. You can invent things like steam-powered window washers. But you can't invent more *time*." Violet was so certain she couldn't invent more time that she didn't even put her hair up in a ribbon to keep it out of her eyes. She merely gave Klaus a look of frustration and confusion, and started to put on her coat. But as she did up the buttons she realized she didn't even need to put her hair up in a ribbon, because the answer was right there with her.

CHAPTER
Seven



"*Hello*, I'm Larry, your waiter," said Larry, the Baudelaire orphans' waiter. He was a short, skinny man in a goofy clown costume with a name tag pinned to his chest that read LARRY. "Welcome to the Anxious Clown restaurant—where everybody has a good time, whether they like it or not. I can see we have a whole family lunching together today, so allow me to recommend the Extra Fun Special Family Appetizer. It's a bunch of things fried up together and served with a sauce."

"What a wonderful idea," Captain Sham said, smiling in a way that showed all of his yellow teeth. "An Extra Fun Special Family Appetizer for an extra fun special family—*mine*."

"I'll just have water, thank you," Violet said.

"Same with me," Klaus said. "And a glass of ice cubes for my baby sister, please."

"I'll have a cup of coffee with nondairy creamer," Mr. Poe said.

"Oh, no, Mr. Poe," Captain Sham said. "Let's share a nice big bottle of red wine."

"No, thank you, Captain Sham," Mr. Poe said. "I don't like to drink during banking hours."

“But this is a celebratory lunch,” Captain Sham exclaimed. “We should drink a toast to my three new children. It’s not every day that a man becomes a father.”

“Please, Captain,” Mr. Poe said. “It is heartening to see that you are glad to raise the Baudelaires, but you must understand that the children are rather upset about their Aunt Josephine.”

There is a lizard called the chameleon that, as you probably know, can change color instantly to blend into its surroundings. Besides being slimy and cold-blooded, Captain Sham resembled the chameleon in that he was chameleonic, a word means “able to blend in with any situation.” Since Mr. Poe and the Baudelaires had arrived at the Anxious Clown, Captain Sham had been unable to conceal his excitement at having the children almost in his clutches. But now that Mr. Poe had pointed out that the occasion actually called for sadness, Captain Sham instantly began to speak in a mournful voice. “I am upset, too,” he said, brushing a tear away from beneath his eyepatch. “Josephine was one of my oldest and dearest friends.”

“You met her *yesterday*,” Klaus said, “in the grocery store.”

“It does only seem like yesterday,” Captain Sham said, “but it was really years ago. She and I met in cooking school. We were oven partners in the Advanced Baking Course.”

“You weren’t *oven partners*,” Violet said, disgusted at Captain Sham’s lies. “Aunt Josephine was desperately afraid of turning on the oven. She never would have attended cooking school.”

“We soon became friends,” Captain Sham said, going on with his story as if no one had interrupted, “and one day she said to me, ‘if I ever adopt some orphans and then meet an untimely death, promise me you will raise them for me.’ I told her I would, but of course I never thought I would have to keep my promise.”

“That’s a very sad story,” Larry said, and everyone turned to see that their waiter was still standing over them. “I didn’t realize this was a sad occasion. In that case, allow me to recommend the Cheer-Up

Cheeseburgers. The pickles, mustard, and ketchup make a little smiley face on top of the burger, which is guaranteed to get you smiling, too."

"That sounds like a good idea," Captain Sham said. "Bring us all Cheer-Up Cheeseburgers, Larry."

"They'll be here in a jiffy," the waiter promised, and at last he was gone.

"Yes, yes," Mr. Poe said, "but after we've finished our cheeseburgers, Captain Sham, there are some important papers for you to sign. I have them in my briefcase, and after lunch we'll look them over."

"And then the children will be mine?" Captain Sham asked.

"Well, you will be caring for them, yes," Mr. Poe said. "Of course, the Baudelaire fortune will still be under my supervision, until Violet comes of age."

"What fortune?" Captain Sham asked, his eyebrow curling. "I don't know anything about a fortune."

"Duna!" Sunny shrieked, which meant something along the lines of "Of course you do!"

"The Baudelaire parents," Mr. Poe explained, "left an enormous fortune behind, and the children inherit it when Violet comes of age."

"Well, I have no interest in a fortune," Captain Sham said. "I have my sailboats. I wouldn't touch a penny of it."

"Well, that's good," Mr. Poe said, "because you *can't* touch a penny of it."

"We'll see," Captain Sham said.

"What?" Mr. Poe asked.

“Here are your Cheer-Up Cheeseburgers!” Larry sang out, appearing at their table with a tray full of greasy-looking food. “Enjoy your meal.”

Like most restaurants filled with neon lights and balloons, the Anxious Clown served terrible food. But the three orphans had not eaten all day, and had not eaten anything warm for a long time, so even though they were sad and anxious they found themselves with quite an appetite. After a few minutes without conversation, Mr. Poe began to tell a very dull story about something that had happened at the bank. Mr. Poe was so busy talking, Klaus and Sunny were so busy pretending to be interested, and Captain Sham was so busy wolfing down his meal, that nobody noticed what Violet was up to.

When Violet had put on her coat to go out into the wind and cold, she had felt the lump of something in her pocket. The lump was the bag of peppermints that Mr. Poe had given the Baudelaires the day they had arrived at Lake Lachrymose, and it had given her an idea. As Mr. Poe droned on and on, she carefully, carefully, took the bag of peppermints out of her coat pocket and opened it. To her dismay, they were the kind of peppermints that are each wrapped up in a little bit of cellophane. Placing her hands underneath the table, she unwrapped three peppermints, using the utmost—the word “utmost,” when it is used here, means “most”—care not to make any of those crinkling noises that come from unwrapping candy and are so annoying in movie theaters. At last, she had three bare peppermints sitting on the napkin in her lap. Without drawing attention to herself, she put on Klaus’s lap and one on Sunny’s. When her younger siblings felt something appear in their laps and looked down and saw the peppermints, they at first thought the eldest Baudelaire orphan had lost her mind. But after a moment, they understood.

If you are allergic to a thing, it is best not to put that thing in your mouth, particularly if the thing is cats. But Violet, Klaus, and Sunny all knew that this was an emergency. They needed time alone to figure out Captain Sham’s plan, and how to stop it, and although causing allergic reactions is a rather drastic way of getting time by yourself, it was the only thing they could think of. So while neither of the adults at the table were watching, all three children put the peppermints into their mouths and waited.

The Baudelaire allergies are famous for being quick-acting, so the orphans did not have long to wait. In a few minutes, Violet began to break out in red, itchy hives, Klaus's tongue started to swell up, and Sunny, who of course had never eaten a peppermint, broke out in hives *and* had her tongue swell up.

Mr. Poe finally finished telling his story and then noticed the orphans' condition. "Why, children," he said, "you look *terrible*! Violet, you have red patches on your skin. Klaus, your tongue is hanging out of your mouth. Sunny, both things are happening to you."

"There must be something in this food that we're allergic to," Violet said.

"My goodness," Mr. Poe said, watching a hive on Violet's arm grow to the size of a hard-boiled egg.

"Just take deep breaths," Captain Sham said, scarcely looking up from his cheeseburger.

"I feel terrible," Violet said, and Sunny began to wail. "I think we should go home and lie down, Mr. Poe."

"Just lean back in your seat," Captain Sham said sharply. "There's no reason to leave when we're in the middle of lunch."

"Why, Captain Sham," Mr. Poe said, "the children are quite ill. Violet is right. Come now, I'll pay the bill and we'll take the children home."

"No, no," Violet said quickly. "We'll get a taxi. You two stay here and take care of all the details."

Captain Sham gave Violet a sharp look. "I wouldn't dream of leaving you all alone," he said in a dark voice.

"Well, there is a lot of paperwork to go over," Mr. Poe said. He glanced at his meal, and the Baudelaires could see he was not too eager to leave the restaurant and care for sick children. "We wouldn't be leaving them alone for long."

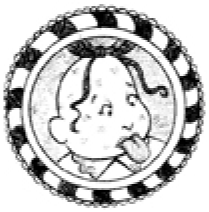
"Our allergies are fairly mild," Violet said truthfully, scratching at one of her hives. She stood up and led her swollen-tongued siblings toward the front door. "We'll just lie down for an hour or two while you have a relaxing lunch. When you have signed all the papers, Captain Sham, you can just come and retrieve us."

Captain Sham's one visible eye grew as shiny as Violet had ever seen it. "I'll do that," he replied. "I'll come and retrieve you very, very soon."

"Good-bye, children," Mr. Poe said. "I hope you feel better soon. You know, Captain Sham, there is someone at my bank who has terrible allergies. Why, I remember one time…"

"Leaving so soon?" Larry asked the three children as they buttoned up their coats. Outside, the wind was blowing harder, and it had started to drizzle as Hurricane Herman got closer and closer to Lake Lachrymose. But even so, the three children were eager to leave the Anxious Clown, and not just because the garish restaurant—the word "garish" here means "filled with balloons, neon lights, and obnoxious waiters"—was filled with balloons, neon lights, and obnoxious waiters. The Baudelaires knew that they had invented just a little bit of time for themselves, and they had to use every second of it.

CHAPTER
Eight



When someone’s tongue swells up due to an allergic reaction, it is often difficult to understand what they are saying.

“Bluh bluh bluh bluh bluh,” Klaus said, as the three children got out of the taxi and headed toward the peeling white door of Aunt Josephine’s house.

“I don’t understand what you’re saying,” Violet said, scratching at a hive on her neck that was the exact shape of the state of Minnesota.

“*Bluh bluh bluh bluh bluh,*” Klaus repeated, or perhaps he was saying something else; I haven’t the faintest idea.

“Never mind, never mind,” Violet said, opening the door and ushering her siblings inside. “Now you have the time that you need to figure out whatever it is that you’re figuring out.”

“Bluh bluh bluh,” Klaus bluhed.

“I still can’t understand you,” Violet said. She took Sunny’s coat off, and then her own, and dropped them both on the floor. Normally, of course, one should hang up one’s coat on a hook or in a closet, but itchy hives are very irritating and tend to make one abandon such matters. “I’m going to assume, Klaus, that you said something in agreement. Now, unless you need us to help you, I'm going to give Sunny and myself a baking soda bath to help our hives."

"Bluh!" Sunny shrieked. She meant to shriek "Gans!" which meant something along the lines of "Good, because my hives are driving me crazy!"

"Bluh," Klaus said, nodding vigorously, and he began hurrying down the hallway. Klaus had not taken off his coat, but it wasn't because of his own irritating allergic condition. It was because he was going someplace cold.

When Klaus opened the door of the library, he was surprised at how much had changed. The wind from the approaching hurricane had blown away the last of the window, and the rain had soaked some of Aunt Josephine's comfortable chairs, leaving dark, spreading stains. A few books had fallen from their shelves and blown over to the window, where water had swollen them. There are few sights sadder than a ruined book, but Klaus had no time to be sad. He knew Captain Sham would come and retrieve the Baudelaires as soon as he could, so he had to get right to work. First he took Aunt Josephine's note out of his pocket and placed it on the table, weighing it down with books so it wouldn't blow away in the wind. Then he crossed quickly to the shelves and began to scan the spines of the books, looking for titles. He chose three: *Basic Rules of Grammar and Punctuation*, *Handbook for Advanced Apostrophe Use*, and *The Correct Spelling of Every English Word That Ever, Ever Existed*. Each of the books was as thick as a watermelon, and Klaus staggered under the weight of carrying all three. With a loud *thump* he dropped them on the table. "Bluh bluh bluh, bluh bluh bluh bluh," he mumbled to himself, and found a pen and got to work.

A library is normally a very good place to work in the afternoon, but not if its window has been smashed and there is a hurricane approaching. The wind blew colder and colder, and it rained harder and harder, and the room became more and more unpleasant. But Klaus took no notice of this. He opened all of the books and took copious—the word "copious" here means "lots of"—notes, stopping every so often to draw a circle around some part of what Aunt Josephine had written. It began to thunder outside, and with each roll of thunder the entire house shook, but Klaus kept flipping pages and writing things down. Then, as lightning began to flash outside, he stopped, and stared at the note for a long time, frowning intently. Finally, he wrote two words at the bottom of Aunt Josephine's note, concentrating so hard as he did so that when Violet and Sunny entered the library and called out his name he nearly jumped out of his chair.

"Bluh surprised bluh!" he shrieked, his heart pounding and his tongue a bit less swollen.

"I'm sorry," Violet said. "I didn't mean to surprise you."

"Bluh bluh take a baking soda bluh?" he asked.

"No," Violet replied. "We couldn't take a baking soda bath. Aunt Josephine doesn't have any baking soda, because she never turns on the oven to bake. We just took a regular bath. But that doesn't matter, Klaus. What have *you* been doing, in this freezing room? Why have you drawn circles all over Aunt Josephine's note?"

"Bluhdying grammar," he replied, gesturing to the books.

"Bluh?" Sunny shrieked, which probably meant "gluh?" which meant something along the lines of "Why are you wasting valuable time studying grammar?"

"Bluhcause," Klaus explained impatiently, "I think bluh Josephine left us a message in bluh note."

"She was miserable, and she threw herself out the window," Violet said, shivering in the wind. "What other message could there be?"

"There are too many grammatical mistakes in the bluh," Klaus said. "Aunt Josephine loved grammar, and she'd never make that many mistakes unless she had a bluh reason. So that's what I've been doing bluh—counting up the grammatical mistakes."

“Bluh,” Sunny said, which meant something along the lines of “Please continue, Klaus.”

Klaus wiped a few raindrops off his glasses and looked down at his notes. “Well, we already know that bluh first sentence uses the wrong ‘its.’ I think that was to get our attention. But look at the second bluhtence. ‘My heart is as cold as Ike and I find life inbearable.’”

“But the correct word is *un*bearable,” Violet said. “You told us that already.”

“Bluh I think there’s more,” Klaus said. “‘My heart is as cold as Ike’ doesn’t sound right to me. Remember, Aunt Josephine told us bluh liked to think of her husband someplace very hot.”

“That’s true,” Violet said, remembering. “She said it right here in this very room. She said Ike liked the sunshine and so she imagined him someplace sunny.”

“So I think Aunt Bluhsephine meant ‘cold as *ice*,’” Klaus said.

“Okay, so we have *ice* and *un*bearable. So far this doesn’t mean anything to me,” Violet said.

“Me neither,” Klaus said. “But look at bluh next part. ‘I know your children may not understand the sad life of a dowadger.’ We don’t have any children.”

“That’s true,” Violet said. “I’m not planning to have children until I am considerably older.”

“So why would Aunt Josephine say ‘your children’? I think she meant ‘*you* children.’ And I looked up ‘dowadger’ in *The Correct Spelling of Every English Word That Ever, Ever Existed*.”

“Why?” Violet asked. “You already know it’s a fancy word for widow.”

“It *is* a bluhncy word for widow,” Klaus replied, “but it’s spelled D-O-W-A-G-E-R. Aunt Josephine added an extra D.”

“Cold as *ice*,” Violet said, counting on her fingers, “*un*bearable, *you* children, and an extra D in dowager. That’s not much of a message, Klaus.”

“Let me finish,” Klaus said. “I discovered even more grammbluhtical mistakes. When she wrote, ‘or what would have leaded me to this desperate akt,’ she meant ‘what would have *led* me,’ and the word ‘act,’ of course, is spelled with a C.”

“Coik!” Sunny shrieked, which meant “Thinking about all this is making me dizzy!”

“Me too, Sunny,” Violet said, lifting her sister up so she could sit on the table. “But let him finish.”

“There are just bluh more,” Klaus said, holding up two fingers. “One, she calls Captain Sham ‘a kind and honorable men,’ when she should have said ‘a kind and honorable *man*.’ And in the last sentence, Aunt Josephine wrote ‘Please think of me kindly even though I’d done this terrible thing,’ but according to the *Handbook for Advanced Apostrophe Use*, she should have written ‘even though *I’ve* done this terrible thing.’”

“But so what?” Violet asked. “What do all these mistakes mean?”

Klaus smiled, and showed his sisters the two words he had written on the bottom of the note. “Curdled Cave,” he read out loud.

“Curdled *veek*?” Sunny asked, which meant “Curdled *what*?”

“Curdled Cave,” Klaus repeated. “If you take all the letters involved in the grammatical mistakes, that’s what it spells. Look: C for ice instead of Ike. U for unbearable instead of inbearable. The extra R in your children instead of you children, and the extra D in dowager. L-E-D for led instead of leaded. C for act instead of akt. A for man instead of men. And V-E for I’ve instead of I’d. That spells CURDLED CAVE. Don’t you see? Aunt Josephine *knew* she was making grammatical errors, and she knew we’d spot them. She was leaving us a message, and the message is Curdled—”

A great gust of wind interrupted Klaus as it came through the shattered window and shook the library as if it were maracas, a word which describes rattling percussion instruments used in Latin American music. Everything rattled wildly around the library as the wind flew through it. Chairs and footstools flipped over and fell to the floor with their legs in the air. The bookshelves rattled so hard that some of the heaviest books in Aunt Josephine's collection spun off into puddles of rainwater on the floor. And the Baudelaire orphans were jerked violently to the ground as a streak of lightning flashed across the darkening sky.

"Let's get out of here!" Violet shouted over the noise of the thunder, and grabbed her siblings by the hand. The wind was blowing so hard that the Baudelaires felt as if they were climbing an enormous hill instead of walking to the door of the library. The orphans were quite out of breath by the time they shut the library door behind them and stood shivering in the hallway.

"Poor Aunt Josephine," Violet said. "Her library is wrecked."

"But I need to go back in there," Klaus said, holding up the note. "We just found out what Aunt Josephine means by Curdled Cave, and we need a library to find out more."

"Not that library," Violet pointed out. "All that library had were books on grammar. We need her books on Lake Lachrymose."

"Why?" Klaus asked.

"Because I'll bet you anything that's where Curdled Cave is," Violet said, "in Lake Lachrymose. Remember she said she knew every island in its waters and every cave on its shore? I bet Curdled Cave is one of those caves."

"But why would her secret message be about some cave?" Klaus asked.

"You've been so busy figuring out the message," Violet said, "that you don't understand what it means. Aunt Josephine isn't dead. She just wants people to *think* she's dead. But she wanted to tell *us* that she was hiding. We have to find her books on Lake Lachrymose and find out where Curdled Cave is."

"But first we have to know where the books are," Klaus said. "She told us she hid them away, remember?"

Sunny shrieked something in agreement, but her siblings couldn't hear her over a burst of thunder.

"Let's see," Violet said. "Where would you hide something if you didn't want to look at it?"

The Baudelaire orphans were quiet as they thought of places they had hidden things they did not want to look at, back when they had lived with their parents in the Baudelaire home. Violet thought of an automatic harmonica she had invented that had made such horrible noises that she had hidden it so she didn't have to think of her failure. Klaus thought of a book on the Franco-Prussian War that was so difficult that he had hidden it so as not to be reminded that he wasn't old enough to read it. And Sunny thought of a piece of stone that was too hard for even her sharpest tooth, and how she had hidden it so her jaw would no longer ache from her many attempts at conquering it. And all three Baudelaire orphans thought of the hiding place they had chosen.

"Underneath the bed," Violet said.

"Underneath the bed," Klaus agreed.

"Seeka yit," Sunny agreed, and without another word the three children ran down the hallway to Aunt Josephine's room. Normally it is not polite to go into somebody's room without knocking, but you can make an exception if the person is dead, or pretending to be dead, and the Baudelaires went right inside. Aunt Josephine's room was similar to the orphans', with a navy-blue bedspread on the bed and a pile of tin cans in the corner. There was a small window looking out onto the rain-soaked hill, and a pile of new grammar books by the side of the bed that Aunt Josephine had not started reading, and, I'm sad to say, would never read. But the only part of the room that interested the children was underneath the bed, and the three of them knelt down to look there.

Aunt Josephine, apparently, had plenty of things she did not want to look at anymore. Underneath the bed there were pots and pans, which she didn’t want to look at because they reminded her of the stove. There were ugly socks somebody had given her as a gift that were too ugly for human eyes. And the Baudelaires were sad to see a framed photograph of a kind-looking man with a handful of crackers in one hand and his lips pursed as if he were whistling. It was Ike, and the Baudelaires knew that she had placed his photograph there because she was too sad to look at it. But behind one of the biggest pots was a stack of books, and the orphans immediately reached for it.

“*The Tides of Lake Lachrymose,*” Violet said, reading the title of the top book. “That won’t help.”

“*The Bottom of Lake Lachrymose,*” Klaus said, reading the next one. “That’s not useful.”

“*Lachrymose Trout,*” Violet read.

“*The History of the Damocles Dock Region,*” Klaus read.

“*Ivan Lachrymose—Lake Explorer,*” Violet read.

“*How Water Is Made,*” Klaus read.

“*A Lachrymose Atlas,*” Violet said.

“Atlas? That’s perfect!” Klaus cried. “An atlas is a book of maps!”

There was a flash of lightning outside the window, and it began to rain harder, making a sound on the roof like somebody was dropping marbles on it. Without another word the Baudelaires opened the atlas and began flipping pages. They saw map after map of the lake, but they couldn’t find Curdled Cave.

“This book is four hundred seventy-eight pages long,” Klaus exclaimed, looking at the last page of the atlas. “It’ll take forever to find Curdled Cave.”

“We don’t have forever,” Violet said. “Captain Sham is probably on his way here now. Use the index in the back. Look under ‘Curdled.’”

Klaus flipped to the index, which I’m sure you know is an alphabetical list of each thing a book contains and what page it’s on. Klaus ran his finger down the list of the C words, muttering out loud to himself. “Carp Cove, Chartreuse Island, Cloudy Cliffs, Condiment Bay, Curdled Cave—here it is! Curdled Cave, page one hundred four.” Quickly Klaus flipped to the correct page and looked at the detailed map. “Curdled Cave, Curdled Cave, where is it?”

“There it is!” Violet pointed a finger at the tiny spot on the map marked *Curdled Cave*. “Directly across from Damocles Dock and just west of the Lavender Lighthouse. Let’s go.”

“Go?” Klaus said. “How will we get across the lake?”

“The Fickle Ferry will take us,” Violet said, pointing at a dotted line on the map. “Look, the ferry goes right to the Lavender Lighthouse, and we can walk from there.”

“We’re going to walk to Damocles Dock, in all this rain?” Klaus asked.

“We don’t have any choice,” Violet answered. “We have to prove that Aunt Josephine is still alive, or else Captain Sham gets us.”

“I just hope she is still—” Klaus started to say, but he stopped himself and pointed out the window. “Look!”

Violet and Sunny looked. The window in Aunt Josephine’s bedroom looked out onto the hill, and the orphans could see one of the spidery metal stilts that kept Aunt Josephine’s house from falling into the lake. But they could also see that this stilt had been badly damaged by the howling storm. There was a large black burn mark, undoubtedly from lightning, and the wind had bent the stilt into an uneasy curve. As the storm raged around them, the orphans watched the stilt struggle to stay attached.

“Tafca!” Sunny shrieked, which meant “We have to get out of here *right now*!”

“Sunny’s right,” Violet said. “Grab the atlas and let’s go.”

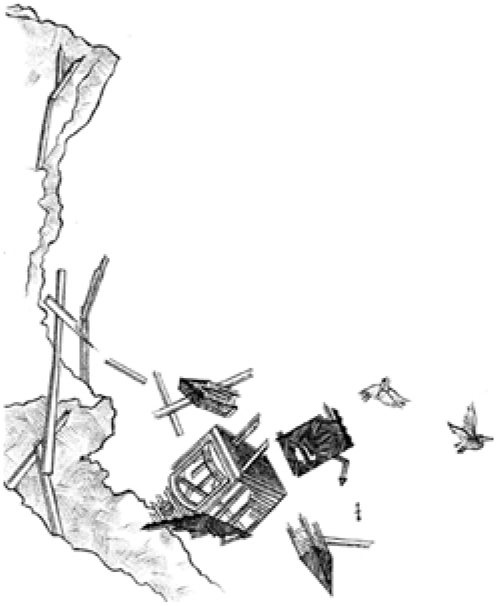
Klaus grabbed *A Lachrymose Atlas*, not wanting to think what would be happening if they were still leafing through the book and had not looked up at the window. As the youngsters stood up, the wind rose to a feverish pitch, a phrase which here means “it shook the house and sent all three orphans toppling to the floor.” Violet fell against one of the bedposts and banged her knee. Klaus fell against the cold radiator and banged his foot. And Sunny fell into the pile of tin cans and banged everything. The whole room seemed to lurch slightly to one side as the orphans staggered back to their feet.

“Come on!” Violet screamed, and grabbed Sunny. The orphans scurried out to the hallway and toward the front door. A piece of the ceiling had come off, and rainwater was steadily pouring onto the carpet, splattering the orphans as they ran underneath it. The house gave another lurch, and the children toppled to the floor again. Aunt Josephine’s house was starting to slip off the hill. “Come on!” Violet screamed again, and the orphans stumbled up the tilted hallway to the door, slipping in puddles and on their own frightened feet. Klaus was the first to reach the front door, and yanked it open as the house gave another lurch, followed by a horrible, horrible crunching sound. “Come on!” Violet screamed again, and the Baudelaires crawled out of the door and onto the hill, huddling together in the freezing rain. They were cold. They were frightened. But they had escaped.

I have seen many amazing things in my long and troubled life history. I have seen a series of corridors built entirely out of human skulls. I have seen a volcano erupt and send a wall of lava crawling toward a small village. I have seen a woman I loved picked up by an enormous eagle and flown to its high mountain nest. But I still cannot imagine what it was like to watch Aunt Josephine’s house topple into Lake Lachrymose. My own research tells me that the children watched in mute amazement as the peeling white door slammed shut and began to crumple, as you might crumple a piece of paper into a ball. I have been told that the children hugged each other even more tightly as they heard the rough and earsplitting noise of their home breaking loose from the side of the hill. But I cannot tell you how it felt to watch the whole building fall down, down, down, and hit the dark and stormy waters of the lake below.

CHAPTER
Nine

The United States Postal Service has a motto. The motto is: “Neither rain nor sleet nor driving snow shall halt the delivery of the mails.” All this means is that even when the weather is nasty and your mailperson wants to stay inside and enjoy a cup of cocoa, he or she has to bundle up and go outside and deliver your mail anyway. The United States Postal Service does not think that icy storms should interfere with its duties.



The Baudelaire orphans were distressed to learn that the Fickle Ferry had no such policy. Violet, Klaus, and Sunny had made their way down the hill with much difficulty. The storm was rising, and the children could tell that the wind and the rain wanted nothing more than to grab them and throw them into the raging waters of Lake Lachrymose. Violet and Sunny hadn’t had the time to grab their coats as they escaped the house, so all three children took turns wearing Klaus’s coat as they stumbled along the flooding road. Once or twice a car drove by, and the Baudelaires had to scurry into the muddy bushes and hide, in case Captain Sham was coming to retrieve them. When they finally reached Damocles Dock, their teeth were chattering and their feet were so cold they could scarcely feel their toes, and the sight of the CLOSED sign in the window of the Fickle Ferry ticket booth was just about more than they could stand.

“It’s *closed*,” Klaus cried, his voice rising with despair and in order to be heard over Hurricane Herman. “How will we get to Curdled Cave now?”

“We’ll have to wait until it opens,” Violet replied.

“But it won’t open until the storm is past,” Klaus pointed out, “and by then Captain Sham will find us and take us far away. We have to get to Aunt Josephine as soon as possible.”

“I don’t know how we can,” Violet said, shivering. “The atlas says that the cave is all the way across the lake, and we can’t *swim* all that way in this weather.”

“Entro!” Sunny shrieked, which meant something along the lines of “And we don’t have enough time to walk around the lake, either.”

“There must be other boats on this lake,” Klaus said, “besides the ferry. Motorboats, or fishing boats, or—” He trailed off, and his eyes met those of his sisters. All three orphans were thinking the same thing.

“Or *sailboats*,” Violet finished for him. “Captain Sham’s Sailboat Rentals. He said it was right on Damocles Dock.”

The Baudelaires stood under the awning of the ticket booth and looked down at the far end of the deserted dock, where they could see a metal gate that was very tall and had glistening spikes on the top of it. Hanging over the metal gate was a sign with some words they couldn’t read, and next to the sign there was a small shack, scarcely visible in the rain, with a flickering light in the window. The children looked at it with dread in their hearts. Walking into Captain Sham's Sailboat Rentals in order to find Aunt Josephine would feel like walking into a lion's den in order to escape from a lion.

"We can't go there," Klaus said.

"We have to," Violet said. "We know Captain Sham isn't there, because he's either on his way to Aunt Josephine's house or still at the Anxious Clown."

"But whoever *is* there," Klaus said, pointing to the flickering light, "won't let us rent a sailboat."

"They won't know we're the Baudelaires," Violet replied. "We'll tell whoever it is that we're the Jones children and that we want to go for a sail."

"In the middle of a hurricane?" Klaus replied. "They won't believe that."

"They'll have to," Violet said resolutely, a word which here means "as if she believed it, even though she wasn't so sure," and she led her siblings toward the shack. Klaus clasped the atlas close to his chest, and Sunny, whose turn it was for Klaus's coat, clutched it around herself, and soon the Baudelaires were shivering underneath the sign that read: CAPTAIN SHAM'S SAILBOAT RENTALS—EVERY BOAT HAS IT'S OWN SAIL. But the tall metal gate was locked up tight, and the Baudelaires paused there, anxious about going inside the shack.

"Let's take a look," Klaus whispered, pointing to a window, but it was too high for him or Sunny to use. Standing on tiptoe, Violet peered into the window of the shack and with one glance she knew there was no way they could rent a sailboat.

The shack was very small, with only room for a small desk and a single lightbulb, which was giving off the flickering light. But at the desk, asleep in a chair, was a person so massive that it looked like an enormous blob was in the shack, snoring away with a bottle of beer in one hand and a ring of keys in the other. As the person snored, the bottle shook, the keys jangled, and the door of the shack creaked open an inch or two, but although those noises were quite spooky, they weren't what frightened Violet. What frightened Violet was that you couldn't tell if this person was a man or a woman. There aren't very many people like that in the world, and Violet knew which one this was. Perhaps you have forgotten about Count Olaf's evil comrades, but the Baudelaires had seen them in the flesh—lots of flesh, in this comrade's case—and remembered all of them in gruesome detail. These people were rude, and they were sneaky, and they did whatever Count Olaf—or in this case, Captain Sham—told them to do, and the orphans never knew when they would turn up. And now, one had turned up right there in the shack, dangerous, treacherous, and snoring.

Violet's face must have shown her disappointment, because as soon as she took a look Klaus asked, "What's wrong? I mean, besides Hurricane Herman, and Aunt Josephine faking her own death, and Captain Sham coming after us and everything."

"One of Count Olaf's comrades is in the shack," Violet said.

"Which one?" Klaus asked.

"The one who looks like neither a man nor a woman," Violet replied.

Klaus shuddered. "That's the scariest one."

"I disagree," Violet said. "I think the bald one is scariest."

"Vass!" Sunny whispered, which probably meant "Let's discuss this at another time."

"Did he or she see you?" Klaus asked.

"No," Violet said. "He or she is asleep. But he or she is holding a ring of keys. We'll need them, I bet, to unlock the gate and get a sailboat."

“You mean we’re going to steal a sailboat?” Klaus asked.

“We have no choice,” Violet said. Stealing, of course, is a crime, and a very impolite thing to do. But like most impolite things, it is excusable under certain circumstances. Stealing is not excusable if, for instance, you are in a museum and you decide that a certain painting would look better in your house, and you simply grab the painting and take it there. But if you were very, very hungry, and you had no way of obtaining money, it might be excusable to grab the painting, take it to your house, and eat it. “We have to get to Curdled Cave as quickly as possible,” Violet continued, “and the only way we can do it is to steal a sailboat.”

“I know that,” Klaus said, “but how are we going to get the keys?”

“I don’t know,” Violet admitted. “The door of the shack is creaky, and I’m afraid if we open it any wider we’ll wake him or her up.”

“You could crawl through the window,” Klaus said, “by standing on my shoulders. Sunny could keep watch.”

“Where *is* Sunny?” Violet asked nervously.

Violet and Klaus looked down at the ground and saw Klaus’s coat sitting alone in a little heap. They looked down the dock but only saw the Fickle Ferry ticket booth and the foamy waters of the lake, darkening in the gloom of the late afternoon.

“She’s gone!” Klaus cried, but Violet put a finger to her lips and stood on tiptoe to look in the window again. Sunny was crawling through the open door of the shack, flattening her little body enough so as not to open the door any wider.

“She’s inside,” Violet murmured.

“In the shack?” Klaus said in a horrified gasp. “Oh no. We have to stop her.”

“She’s crawling very slowly toward that person,” Violet said, afraid even to blink.

“We promised our parents we’d take care of her,” Klaus said. “We can’t let her do this.”

“She’s reaching toward the key ring,” Violet said breathlessly. “She’s gently prying it loose from the person’s hand.”

“Don’t tell me any more,” Klaus said, as a bolt of lightning streaked across the sky. “No, do tell me. What is happening?”

“She has the keys,” Violet said. “She’s putting them in her mouth to hold them. She’s crawling back toward the door. She’s flattening herself and crawling through.”

“She’s made it,” Klaus said in amazement. Sunny came crawling triumphantly toward the orphans, the keys in her mouth. “Violet, she made it,” Klaus said, giving Sunny a hug as a huge *boom*! of thunder echoed across the sky.

Violet smiled down at Sunny, but stopped smiling when she looked back into the shack. The thunder had awoken Count Olaf’s comrade, and Violet watched in dismay as the person looked at its empty hand where the key ring had been, and then down on the floor where Sunny had left little crawl-prints of rainwater, and then up to the window and right into Violet’s eyes.

“She’s awake!” Violet shrieked. “He’s awake! It’s awake! Hurry, Klaus, open the gate and I’ll try to distract it.”

Without another word, Klaus took the key ring from Sunny’s mouth and hurried to the tall metal gate. There were three keys on the ring—a skinny one, a thick one, and one with teeth as jagged as the glistening spikes hanging over the children. He put the atlas down on the ground and began to try the skinny key in the lock, just as Count Olaf’s comrade came lumbering out of the shack.

Her heart in her throat, Violet stood in front of the creature and gave it a fake smile. “Good afternoon,” she said, not knowing whether to add “sir” or “madam.” “I seem to have gotten lost on this dock. Could you tell me the way to the Fickle Ferry?”

Count Olaf’s comrade did not answer, but kept shuffling toward the orphans. The skinny key fit into the lock but didn’t budge, and Klaus tried the thick one.

“I’m sorry,” Violet said, “I didn’t hear you. Could you tell me—”

Without a word the mountainous person grabbed Violet by the hair, and with one swing of its arm lifted her up over its smelly shoulder the way you might carry a backpack. Klaus couldn’t get the thick key to fit in the lock and tried the jagged one, just as the person scooped up Sunny with its other hand and held her up, the way you might hold an ice cream cone.

“*Klaus*!” Violet screamed. “*Klaus*!”

The jagged key wouldn’t fit in the lock, either. Klaus, in frustration, shook and shook the metal gate. Violet was kicking the creature from behind, and Sunny was biting its wrist, but the person was so Brobdingnagian—a word which here means “unbelievably husky”—that the children were causing it minimal pain, a phrase which here means “no pain at all.” Count Olaf’s comrade lumbered toward Klaus, holding the other two orphans in its grasp. In desperation, Klaus tried the skinny key again in the lock, and to his surprise and relief it turned and the tall metal gate swung open. Just a few feet away were six sailboats tied to the end of the dock with thick rope—sailboats that could take them to Aunt Josephine. But Klaus was too late. He felt something grab the back of his shirt, and he was lifted up in the air. Something slimy began running down his back, and Klaus realized with horror that the person was holding him in his or her mouth.

“Put me down!” Klaus screamed. “Put me down!”

“Put me down!” Violet yelled. “Put me down!”

"Poda rish!" Sunny shrieked. "Poda rish!"

But the lumbering creature had no concern for the wishes of the Baudelaire orphans. With great sloppy steps it turned itself around and began to carry the youngsters back toward the shack. The children heard the gloppy sound of its chubby feet sloshing through the rain, *gumsh*, *gumsh*, *gumsh*, *gumsh*. But then, instead of a *gumsh*, there was a *skittle-wat* as the person stepped on Aunt Josephine's atlas, which slipped from under its feet. Count Olaf's comrade waved its arms to keep its balance, dropping Violet and Sunny, and then fell to the ground, opening its mouth in surprise and dropping Klaus. The orphans, being in reasonably good physical shape, got to their feet much more quickly than this despicable creature, and ran through the open gate to the nearest sailboat. The creature struggled to right itself and chase them, but Sunny had already bitten the rope that tied the boat to the dock. By the time the creature reached the spiky metal gate, the orphans were already on the stormy waters of Lake Lachrymose. In the dim light of the late afternoon, Klaus wiped the grime of the creature's foot off the cover of the atlas, and began to read it. Aunt Josephine's book of maps had saved them once, in showing them the location of Curdled Cave, and now it had saved them again.

CHAPTER **Ten**

The good people who are publishing this book have a concern that they have expressed to me. The concern is that readers like yourself will read my history of the Baudelaire orphans and attempt to imitate some of the things they do. So at this point in the story, in order to mollify the publishers—the word “mollify” here means “get them to stop tearing their hair out in worry”—please allow me to give you a piece of advice, even though I don’t know anything about you. The piece of advice is as follows: If you ever need to get to Curdled Cave in a hurry, do not, under any circumstances, steal a boat and attempt to sail across Lake Lachrymose during a hurricane, because it is very dangerous and the chances of your survival are practically zero. You should especially not do this if, like the Baudelaire orphans, you have only a vague idea of how to work a sailboat.

Count Olaf’s comrade, standing at the dock and waving a chubby fist in the air, grew smaller and smaller as the wind carried the sailboat away from Damocles Dock. As Hurricane Herman raged over them, Violet, Klaus, and Sunny examined the sailboat they had just stolen. It was fairly small, with wooden seats and bright orange life jackets for five people. On top of the mast, which is a word meaning “the tall wooden post found in the middle of boats,” was a grimy white sail controlled by a series of ropes, and on the floor was a pair of wooden oars in case there was no wind. In the back, there was a sort of wooden lever with a handle for moving it this way and that, and under one of the seats was a shiny metal bucket for bailing out any water in case of a leak. There was also a long pole with a fishing net at the end of it, a small fishing rod with a sharp hook and a rusty spying glass, which is a sort of telescope used for navigating. The three siblings struggled into their life vests as the stormy waves of Lake Lachrymose took them farther and farther away from the shore.

“I read a book about working a sailboat,” Klaus shouted over the noise of the hurricane. “We have to use the sail to catch the wind. Then it will push us where we want to go.”

“And this lever is called a tiller,” Violet shouted. “I remember it from studying some naval blueprints. The tiller controls the rudder, which is below the water, steering the ship. Sunny, sit in back and work the tiller.

Klaus, hold the atlas so we can tell where we're going, and I'll try to work the sail. I think if I pull on *this* rope, I can control the sail."

Klaus turned the damp pages of the atlas to page 104. "*That* way," he called, pointing to the right. "The sun is setting over there, so that must be west."

Sunny scurried to the back of the sailboat and put her tiny hands on the tiller just as a wave hit the boat and sprayed her with foam. "Karg tem!" she called, which meant something along the lines of "I'm going to move the tiller *this* way, in order to steer the boat according to Klaus's recommendation."

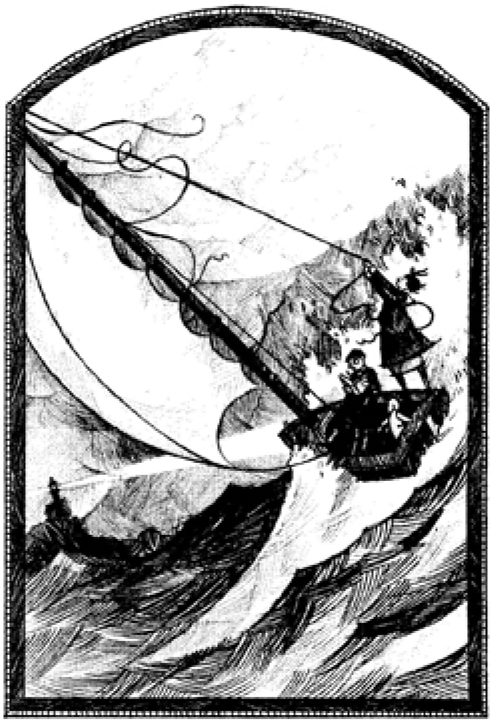
The rain whipped around them, and the wind howled, and a small wave splashed over the side, but to the orphans' amazement, the sailboat moved in the exact direction they wanted it to go. If you had come across the three Baudelaires at this moment, you would have thought their lives were filled with joy and happiness, because even though they were exhausted, damp, and in very great danger, they began to laugh in their triumph. They were so relieved that something had finally gone right that they laughed as if they were at the circus instead of in the middle of a lake, in the middle of a hurricane, in the middle of trouble.

As the storm wore itself out splashing waves over the sailboat and flashing lightning over their heads, the Baudelaires sailed the tiny boat across the vast and dark lake. Violet pulled ropes this way and that to catch the wind, which kept changing direction as wind tends to do. Klaus kept a close eye on the atlas and made sure they weren't heading off course to the Wicked Whirlpool or the Rancorous Rocks. And Sunny kept the boat level by turning the tiller whenever Violet signaled. And just when the evening turned to night, and it was too dark to read the atlas, the Baudelaires saw a blinking light of pale purple. The orphans had always thought lavender was a rather sickly color, but for the first time in their lives they were glad to see it. It meant that the sailboat was approaching the Lavender Lighthouse, and soon they'd be at Curdled Cave. The storm finally broke—the word "broke" here means "ended," rather than "shattered" or "lost all its money"—and the clouds parted to reveal an almost-full moon. The children shivered in their soaking clothes and stared out at the calming waves of the lake, watching the swirls of its inky depths.

“Lake Lachrymose is actually very pretty,” Klaus said thoughtfully. “I never noticed it before.”

“Cind,” Sunny agreed, adjusting the tiller slightly.

“I guess we never noticed it because of Aunt Josephine,” Violet said. “We got used to looking at the lake through her eyes.” She picked up the spying glass and squinted into it, and she was just able to see the shore. “I think I can see the lighthouse over there. There’s a dark hole in the cliff right next to it. It must be the mouth of Curdled Cave.”



Sure enough, as the sailboat drew closer and closer, the children could just make out the Lavender Lighthouse and the mouth of the nearby cave, but when they looked into its depths, they could see no sign of Aunt Josephine, or of anything else for that matter. Rocks began to scrape the bottom of the boat, which meant they were in very shallow water, and Violet jumped out to drag the sailboat onto the craggy shore. Klaus and Sunny stepped out of the boat and took off their life jackets. Then they stood at the mouth of Curdled Cave and paused nervously. In front of the cave there was a sign saying it was for sale, and the orphans could not imagine who would want to buy such a phantasmagorical—the word "phantasmagorical" here means "all the creepy, scary words you can think of put together"—place. The mouth of the cave had jagged rocks all over it like teeth in the mouth of a shark. Just beyond the entrance the youngsters could see strange white rock formations, all melted and twisted together so they looked like moldy milk. The floor of the cave was as pale and dusty as if it were made of chalk. But it was not these sights that made the children pause. It was the sound coming out of the cave. It was a high-pitched, wavering wail, a hopeless and lost sound, as strange and as eerie as Curdled Cave itself.

"What is that sound?" Violet asked nervously.

"Just the wind, probably," Klaus replied. "I read somewhere that when wind passes through small spaces, like caves, it can make weird noises. It's nothing to be afraid of."

The orphans did not move. The sound did not stop.

"I'm afraid of it, anyway," Violet said.

"Me too," Klaus said.

"Geni," Sunny said, and began to crawl into the mouth of the cave. She probably meant something along the lines of "We didn't sail a stolen sailboat across Lake Lachrymose in the middle of Hurricane Herman just to stand nervously at the mouth of a cave," and her siblings had to agree with her and follow her inside. The wailing was louder as it echoed off the walls and rock formations, and the Baudelaires could tell it wasn't the wind. It was Aunt Josephine, sitting in a corner of the cave and sobbing with her head in her hands. She was crying so hard that she hadn't even noticed the Baudelaires come into the cave.

"Aunt Josephine," Klaus said hesitantly, "we're here."

Aunt Josephine looked up, and the children could see that her face was wet from tears and chalky from the cave. “You figured it out,” she said, wiping her eyes and standing up. “I knew you could figure it out,” she said, and took each of the Baudelaires in her arms. She looked at Violet, and then at Klaus, and then at Sunny, and the orphans looked at her and found themselves with tears in their own eyes as they greeted their guardian. It was as if they had not quite believed that Aunt Josephine’s death was fake until they had seen her alive with their own eyes.

“I knew you were clever children,” Aunt Josephine said. “I knew you would read my message.”

“Klaus really did it,” Violet said.

“But Violet knew how to work the sailboat,” Klaus said. “Without Violet we never would have arrived here.”

“And Sunny stole the keys,” Violet said, “and worked the tiller.”

“Well, I’m glad you all made it here,” Aunt Josephine said. “Let me just catch my breath and I’ll help you bring in your things.”

The children looked at one another. “What things?” Violet asked.

“Why, your luggage of course,” Aunt Josephine replied. “And I hope you brought some food, because the supplies I brought are almost gone.”

“We didn’t bring any food,” Klaus said.

“No food?” Aunt Josephine said. “How in the world are you going to live with me in this cave if you didn’t bring any food?”

“We didn’t come here to live with you,” Violet said.

Aunt Josephine’s hands flew to her head and she rearranged her bun nervously. “Then why are you here?” she asked.

“Stim!” Sunny shrieked, which meant “Because we were worried about you!”

“‘Stim’ is not a sentence, Sunny,” Aunt Josephine said sternly. “Perhaps one of your older siblings could explain in correct English why you’re here.”

“Because Captain Sham almost had us in his clutches!” Violet cried. “Everyone thought you were dead, and you wrote in your will and testament that we should be placed in the care of Captain Sham.”

“But he forced me to do that,” Aunt Josephine whined. “That night, when he called me on the phone, he told me he was really Count Olaf. He said I had to write out a will saying you children would be left in his care. He said if I didn’t write what he said, he would drown me in the lake. I was so frightened that I agreed immediately.”

“Why didn’t you call the police?” Violet asked. “Why didn’t you call Mr. Poe? Why didn’t you call somebody who could have helped?”

“You know why,” Aunt Josephine said crossly. “I’m afraid of using the phone. Why, I was just getting used to answering it. I’m nowhere near ready to use the numbered buttons. But in any case, I didn’t need to call anybody. I threw a footstool through the window and then sneaked out of the house. I left you the note so that you would know I wasn’t really dead, but I hid my message so that Captain Sham wouldn’t know I had escaped from him.”

“Why didn’t you take us with you? Why did you leave us all alone by ourselves? Why didn’t you protect us from Captain Sham?” Klaus asked.

“It is not grammatically correct,” Aunt Josephine said, “to say ‘leave us all alone by ourselves.’ You can say ‘leave us all alone,’ or ‘leave us by ourselves,’ but not both. Do you understand?”

The Baudelaires looked at one another in sadness and anger. They understood. They understood that Aunt Josephine was more concerned with grammatical mistakes than with saving the lives of the three children. They understood that she was so wrapped up in her own fears that she had not given a thought to what might have happened to them. They understood that Aunt Josephine had been a terrible guardian, in leaving the children all by themselves in great danger. They understood and they wished more than ever that their parents, who never would have run away and left them alone, had not been killed in that terrible fire which had begun all the misfortune in the Baudelaire lives.

“Well, enough grammar lessons for today,” Aunt Josephine said. “I’m happy to see you, and you are welcome to share this cave with me. I don’t think Captain Sham will ever find us here.”

“We’re not *staying here*,” Violet said impatiently. “We’re sailing back to town, and we’re taking you with us.”

“No way, José,” Aunt Josephine said, using an expression which means “No way” and has nothing to do with José, whoever he is. “I’m too frightened of Captain Sham to face him. After all he’s done to you I would think that you would be frightened of him, too.”

“We *are* frightened of him,” Klaus said, “but if we prove that he’s really Count Olaf he will go to jail. You are the proof. If you tell Mr. Poe what happened, then Count Olaf will be locked away and we will be safe.”

“You can tell him, if you want to,” Aunt Josephine said. “I’m staying here.”

“He won’t believe us unless you come with us and prove that you’re alive,” Violet said.

“No, no, no,” Aunt Josephine said. “I’m too afraid.”

Violet took a deep breath and faced her frightened guardian. “We’re *all* afraid,” she said firmly. “We were afraid when we met Captain Sham in the grocery store. We were afraid when we thought that you had jumped out the window. We were afraid to give ourselves allergic reactions, and we were afraid to steal a sailboat and we were afraid to make our way across this lake in the middle of a hurricane. But that didn’t stop us.”

Aunt Josephine’s eyes filled up with tears. “I can’t help it that you’re braver than I,” she said. “I’m not sailing across that lake. I’m not making any phone calls. I’m going to stay right here for the rest of my life, and nothing you can say will change my mind.”

Klaus stepped forward and played his trump card, a phrase which means “said something very convincing, which he had saved for the end of the argument.” “Curdled Cave,” he said, “is for sale.”

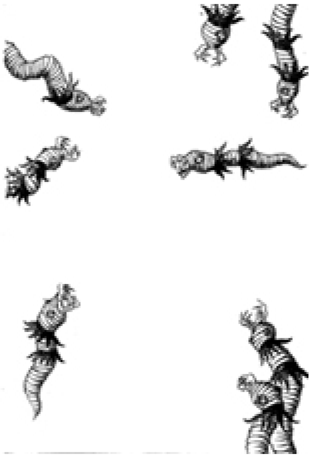
“So what?” Aunt Josephine said.

“That means,” Klaus said, “that before long certain people will come to look at it. And some of those people”—he paused here dramatically—“will be realtors.”

Aunt Josephine’s mouth hung open, and the orphans watched her pale throat swallow in fear. “Okay,” she said finally, looking around the cave anxiously as if a realtor were already hiding in the shadows. “I’ll go.”

CHAPTER
Eleven

“*Oh* no,” Aunt Josephine said.



The children paid no attention. The worst of Hurricane Herman was over, and as the Baudelaires sailed across the dark lake there seemed to be very little danger. Violet moved the sail around with ease now that the wind was calm. Klaus looked back at the lavender light of the lighthouse and confidently guided the way back to Damocles Dock. And Sunny moved the tiller as if she had been a tiller-mover all her life. Only Aunt Josephine was scared. She was wearing two life jackets instead of one, and every few seconds she cried “Oh no,” even though nothing frightening was happening.

“Oh no,” Aunt Josephine said, “and I mean it this time.”

“What’s wrong, Aunt Josephine?” Violet said tiredly. The sailboat had reached the approximate middle of the lake. The water was still fairly calm, and the lighthouse still glowed, a pinpoint of pale purple light. There seemed to be no cause for alarm.

“We’re about to enter the territory of the Lachrymose Leeches,” Aunt Josephine said.

“I’m sure we’ll pass through safely,” Klaus said, peering through the spying glass to see if Damocles Dock was visible yet. “You told us that the leeches were harmless and only preyed on small fish.”

“Unless you’ve eaten recently,” Aunt Josephine said.

“But it’s been hours since we’ve eaten,” Violet said soothingly. “The last thing we ate were peppermints at the Anxious Clown. That was in the afternoon, and now it’s the middle of the night.”

Aunt Josephine looked down, and moved away from the side of the boat. “But I ate a banana,” she whispered, “just before you arrived.”

“Oh no,” Violet said. Sunny stopped moving the tiller and looked worriedly into the water.

“I’m sure there’s nothing to worry about,” Klaus said. “Leeches are very small animals. If we were in the water, we might have reason to fear, but I don’t think they’d attack a sailboat. Plus, Hurricane Herman may have frightened them away from their territory. I bet the Lachrymose Leeches won’t even show up.”

Klaus thought he was done speaking for the moment, but in the moment that followed he added one more sentence. The sentence was “Speak of the Devil,” and it is an expression that you use when you are talking about something only to have it occur. For instance, if you were at a picnic and said, “I hope it doesn’t snow,” and at that very minute a blizzard began, you could say, “Speak of the Devil” before gathering up your blanket and potato salad and driving away to a good restaurant. But in the case of the

Baudelaire orphans, I’m sure you can guess what happened to prompt Klaus to use this expression.

“Speak of the Devil,” Klaus said, looking into the waters of the lake. Out of the swirling blackness came skinny, rising shapes, barely visible in the moonlight. The shapes were scarcely longer than a finger, and at first it looked as if someone were swimming in the lake and drumming their fingers on the surface of the water. But most people have only ten fingers, and in the few minutes that followed there were hundreds of these tiny shapes, wriggling hungrily from all sides toward the sailboat. The Lachrymose Leeches made a quiet, whispering sound on the water as they swam, as if the Baudelaire orphans were surrounded by people murmuring terrible secrets. The children watched in silence as the swarm approached the boat, each leech knocking lightly against the wood. Their tiny leech-mouths puckered in disappointment as they tried to taste the sailboat. Leeches are blind, but they aren’t stupid, and the Lachrymose Leeches knew that they were not eating a banana.

“You see?” Klaus said nervously, as the tapping of leech-mouths continued. “We’re perfectly safe.”

“Yes,” Violet said. She wasn’t sure they were perfectly safe, not at all, but it seemed best to tell Aunt Josephine they were perfectly safe. “We’re perfectly safe,” she said.

The tapping sound continued, getting a little rougher and louder. Frustration is an interesting emotional state, because it tends to bring out the worst in whoever is frustrated. Frustrated babies tend to throw food and make a mess. Frustrated citizens tend to execute kings and queens and make a democracy. And frustrated moths tend to bang up against lightbulbs and make light fixtures all dusty. But unlike babies, citizens, and moths, leeches are quite unpleasant to begin with. Now that the Lachrymose Leeches were getting frustrated, everyone on board the sailboat was quite anxious to see what would happen when frustration brought out the worst in leeches. For a while, the small creatures tried and tried to eat the wood, but their tiny teeth didn’t really do anything but make an unpleasant knocking sound. But then, all at once, the leeches knocked off, and the Baudelaires watched them wriggle away from the sailboat.

“They’re leaving,” Klaus said hopefully, but they weren’t leaving. When the leeches had reached a considerable distance, they suddenly swiveled their tiny bodies around and came rushing back to the boat. With a loud *thwack*! the leeches all hit the boat more or less at once, and the sailboat rocked precariously, a word which here means “in a way which almost threw Aunt Josephine and the Baudelaire youngsters to their doom.” The four passengers were rocked to and fro and almost fell into the waters of the lake, where the leeches were wriggling away again to prepare for another attack.

“Yadec!” Sunny shrieked and pointed at the side of the boat. Yadec, of course, is not grammatically correct English, but even Aunt Josephine understood that the youngest Baudelaire meant “Look at the crack in the boat that the leeches have made!” The crack was a tiny one, about as long as a pencil and about as wide as a human hair, and it was curved downward so it looked as if the sailboat were frowning at them. If the leeches kept hitting the side of the boat, the frown would only get wider.

“We have to sail much faster,” Klaus said, “or this boat will be in pieces in no time.”

“But sailing relies on the wind,” Violet pointed out. “We can’t make the wind go faster.”

“I’m frightened!” Aunt Josephine cried. “Please don’t throw me overboard!”

“Nobody’s going to throw you overboard,” Violet said impatiently, although I’m sorry to tell you that Violet was wrong about that. “Take an oar, Aunt Josephine. Klaus, take the other one. If we use the sail, the tiller, *and* the oars we should move more quickly.”

Thwack! The Lachrymose Leeches hit the side of the boat, widening the crack in the side and rocking the boat again. One of the leeches was thrown over the side in the impact, and twisted this way and that on the floor of the boat, gnashing its tiny teeth as it looked for food. Grimacing, Klaus walked cautiously over to it and tried to kick the leech overboard, but it clung onto his shoe and began gnawing through the leather. With a cry of disgust, Klaus shook his leg, and the leech fell to the floor of the sailboat again, stretching its tiny neck and opening and shutting its mouth. Violet grabbed the long pole with the net at the end of it, scooped up the leech, and tossed it overboard.

Thwack! The crack widened enough that a bit of water began to dribble through, making a small puddle on the sailboat's floor. "Sunny," Violet said, "keep an eye on that puddle. When it gets bigger, use the bucket to throw it back in the lake."

"Mofee!" Sunny shrieked, which meant "I certainly will." There was the whispering sound as the leeches swam away to ram the boat again. Klaus and Aunt Josephine began rowing as hard as they could, while Violet adjusted the sail and kept the net in her hand for any more leeches who got on board.

Thwack! Thwack! There were two loud noises now, one on the side of the boat and one on the bottom, which cracked immediately. The leeches had divided up into two teams, which is good news for playing kickball but bad news if you are being attacked. Aunt Josephine gave a shriek of terror. Water was now leaking into the sailboat in two spots, and Sunny abandoned the tiller to bail the water back out. Klaus stopped rowing, and held the oar up without a word. It had several small bite marks in it—the work of the Lachrymose Leeches.

"Rowing isn't going to work," he reported to Violet solemnly. "If we row any more these oars will be completely eaten."

Violet watched Sunny crawl around with the bucket full of water. "Rowing won't help us, anyway," she said. "This boat is sinking. We need help."

Klaus looked around at the dark and still waters, empty except for the sailboat and swarms of leeches. "Where can we get help in the middle of a lake?" he asked.

"We're going to have to signal for help," Violet said, and reached into her pocket and took out a ribbon. Handing Klaus the fishing net, she used the ribbon to tie her hair up, keeping it out of her eyes. Klaus and Sunny watched her, knowing that she only tied her hair up this way when she was thinking of an invention, and right now they needed an invention quite desperately.

“That’s right,” Aunt Josephine said to Violet, “close your eyes. That’s what I do when I’m afraid, and it always makes me feel better to block out the fear.”

“She’s not blocking out anything,” Klaus said crossly. “She’s concentrating.”

Klaus was right. Violet concentrated as hard as she could, racking her brain for a good way to signal for help. She thought of fire alarms. With flashing lights and loud sirens, fire alarms were an excellent way to signal for assistance. Although the Baudelaire orphans, of course, sadly knew that sometimes the fire engines arrived too late to save people’s lives, a fire alarm was still a good invention, and Violet tried to think of a way she could imitate it using the materials around her. She needed to make a loud sound, to get somebody’s attention. And she needed to make a bright light, so that person would know where they were.

Thwack! Thwack! The two teams of leeches hit the boat again, and there was a splash as more water came pouring into the sailboat. Sunny started to fill the bucket with water, but Violet reached forward and took it from Sunny’s hands. “Bero?” Sunny shrieked, which meant “Are you crazy?” but Violet had no time to answer “No, as a matter of fact I’m not.” So she merely said “No,” and, holding the bucket in one hand, began to climb up the mast. It is difficult enough to climb up the mast of a boat, but it is triple the difficulty if the boat is being rocked by a bunch of hungry leeches, so allow me to advise you that this is another thing that you should under no circumstances try to do. But Violet Baudelaire was a wunderkind, a German word which here means “someone who is able to quickly climb masts on boats being attacked by leeches,” and soon she was on the top of the swaying mast of the boat. She took the bucket and hung it by its handle on the tip of the mast so it swung this way and that, the way a bell might do in a bell tower.

“I don’t mean to interrupt you,” Klaus called, scooping up a furious leech in the net and tossing it as far as he could, “but this boat is really sinking. Please hurry.”

Violet hurried. Hurriedly, she grabbed ahold of a corner of the sail and, taking a deep breath to prepare herself, jumped back down to the floor of the boat. Just as she had hoped, the sail ripped as she hurtled to the ground, slowing her down and leaving her with a large piece of torn cloth. By now the sailboat had quite a lot of water in it, and Violet splashed over to Aunt Josephine, avoiding the many leeches that Klaus was tossing out of the boat as quickly as he could.

“I need your oar,” Violet said, wadding the piece of sail up into a ball, “and your hairnet.”

“You can have the oar,” Aunt Josephine said, handing it over. “But I need my hairnet. It keeps my bun in place.”

“Give her the hairnet!” Klaus cried, hopping up on one of the seats as a leech tried to bite his knee.

“But I’m scared of having hair in my face,” Aunt Josephine whined, just as another pair of *thwack*!s hit the boat.

“I don’t have time to argue with you!” Violet cried. “I’m trying to save each of our lives! Give me your hairnet right now!”

“The expression,” Aunt Josephine said, “is saving *all of our lives*, not *each of our lives*,” but Violet had heard enough. Splashing forward and avoiding a pair of wriggling leeches, the eldest Baudelaire reached forward and grabbed Aunt Josephine’s hairnet off of her head. She wrapped the crumpled part of the sail in the hairnet, and then grabbed the fishing pole and attached the messy ball of cloth to the fishhook. It looked like she was about to go fishing for some kind of fish that liked sailboats and hair accessories for food.

Thwack! Thwack! The sailboat tilted to one side and then to the other. The leeches had almost smashed their way through the side. Violet took the oar and began to rub it up and down the side of the boat as fast and as hard as she could.

"What are you doing?" Klaus asked, catching three leeches in one swoop of his net.

"I'm trying to create friction," Violet said. "If I rub two pieces of wood enough, I'll create friction. Friction creates sparks. When I get a spark, I'll set the cloth and hairnet on fire and use it as a signal."

"You want to set a fire?" Klaus cried. "But a fire will mean more danger."

"Not if I wave the fire over my head, using the fishing pole," Violet said. "I'll do that, and hit the bucket like a bell, and that should create enough of a signal to fetch us some help." She rubbed and rubbed the oar against the side of the boat, but no sparks appeared. The sad truth was that the wood was too wet from Hurricane Herman and from Lake Lachrymose to create enough friction to start a fire. It was a good idea, but Violet realized, as she rubbed and rubbed without any result, that it was the wrong idea. *Thwack! Thwack*! Violet looked around at Aunt Josephine and her terrified siblings and felt hope leak out of her heart as quickly as water was leaking into the boat. "It's not working," Violet said miserably, and felt tears fall down her cheeks. She thought of the promise she made to her parents, shortly before they were killed, that she would always take care of her younger siblings. The leeches swarmed around the sinking boat, and Violet feared that she had not lived up to her promise. "It's not working," she said again, and dropped the oar in despair. "We need a fire, but I can't invent one."

"It's okay," Klaus said, even though of course it was not. "We'll think of something."

"Tintet," Sunny said, which meant something along the lines of "Don't cry. You tried your best," but Violet cried anyway. It is very easy to say that the important thing is to try your best, but if you are in real trouble the most important thing is not trying your best, but getting to safety. The boat rocked back and forth, and water poured through the cracks, and Violet cried because it looked like they would never get to safety. Her shoulders shaking with sobs, she held the spying glass up to her eye to see if, by any chance, there was a boat nearby, or if the tide had happened to carry the sailboat to shore, but all she could see was the moonlight reflecting on the rippling waters of the lake. And this was a lucky thing. Because as soon as Violet saw the flickering reflection, she remembered the scientific principles of the convergence and refraction of light.

The scientific principles of the convergence and refraction of light are very confusing, and quite frankly I can't make head or tail of them, even when my friend Dr. Lorenz explains them to me. But they made perfect sense to Violet. Instantly, she thought of a story her father had told her, long ago, when she was just beginning to be interested in science. When her father was a boy, he'd had a dreadful cousin who liked to burn ants, starting a fire by focusing the light of the sun with her magnifying glass. Burning ants, of course, is an abhorrent hobby—the word "abhorrent" here means "what Count Olaf used to do when he was about your age"—but remembering the story made Violet see that she could use the lens of the spying glass to focus the light of the moon and make a fire. Without wasting another moment, she grabbed the spying glass and removed the lens, and then, looking up at the moon, tilted the lens at an angle she hastily computed in her head.

The moonlight passed through the lens and was concentrated into a long, thin band of light, like a glowing thread leading right to the piece of sail, held in a ball by Aunt Josephine's hairnet. In a moment the thread had become a small flame.

"It's miraculous!" Klaus cried, as the flame took hold.

"It's unbelievable!" Aunt Josephine cried.

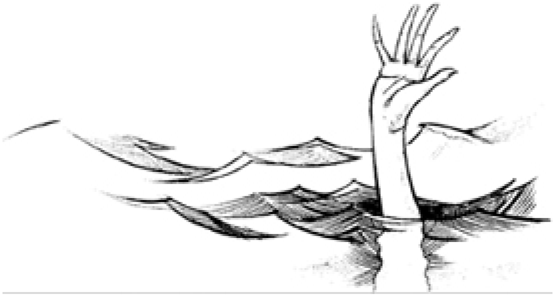
"Fonti!" Sunny shrieked.

"It's the scientific principles of the convergence and refraction of light!" Violet cried, wiping her eyes. Stepping carefully to avoid onboard leeches and so as not to put out the fire, she moved to the front of the boat. With one hand, she took the oar and rang the bucket, making a loud sound to get somebody’s attention. With the other hand, she held the fishing rod up high, making a bright light so the person would know where they were. Violet looked up at her homemade signaling device that had finally caught fire, all because of a silly story her father had told her. Her father’s ant-burning cousin sounded like a dreadful person, but if she had suddenly appeared on the sailboat Violet would have given her a big grateful hug.

As it turned out, however, this signal was a mixed blessing, a phrase which means “something half good and half bad.” Somebody saw the signal almost immediately, somebody who was already sailing in the lake, and who headed toward the Baudelaires in an instant. Violet, Klaus, Sunny, and even Aunt Josephine all grinned as they saw another boat sail into view. They were being rescued, and that was the good half. But their smiles began to fade as the boat drew closer and they saw who was sailing it. Aunt Josephine and the orphans saw the wooden peg leg, and the navy-blue sailor cap, and the eye patch, and they knew who was coming to their aid. It was Captain Sham, of course, and he was probably the worst half in the world.

CHAPTER
Twelve

"*Welcome* aboard," Captain Sham said, with a wicked grin that showed his filthy teeth. "I'm happy to see you all. I thought you had been killed when the old lady's house fell off the hill, but luckily my associate told me you had stolen a boat and run away. And you, Josephine—I thought you'd done the sensible thing and jumped out the window."



"I tried to do the sensible thing," Aunt Josephine said sourly. "But these children came and got me."

Captain Sham smiled. He had expertly steered his sailboat so it was alongside the one the Baudelaires had stolen, and Aunt Josephine and the children had stepped over the swarming leeches to come aboard. With a gurgly *whoosh*! their own sailboat was overwhelmed with water and quickly sank into the depths of the lake. The Lachrymose Leeches swarmed around the sinking sailboat, gnashing their tiny teeth. "Aren't you going to say thank you, orphans?" Captain Sham asked, pointing to the swirling place in the lake where their sailboat had been. “If it weren’t for me, all of you would be divided up into the stomachs of those leeches.”

“If it weren’t for you,” Violet said fiercely, “we wouldn’t be in Lake Lachrymose to begin with.”

“You can blame *that* on the old woman,” he said, pointing to Aunt Josephine. “Faking your own death was pretty clever, but not clever enough. The Baudelaire fortune—and, unfortunately, the brats who come with it—now belong to me.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Klaus said. “We don’t belong to you and we never will. Once we tell Mr. Poe what happened he will send you to jail.”

“Is that so?” Captain Sham said, turning the sailboat around and sailing toward Damocles Dock. His one visible eye was shining brightly as if he were telling a joke. “Mr. Poe will send me to jail, eh? Why, Mr. Poe is putting finishing touches on your adoption papers this very moment. In a few hours, you orphans will be Violet, Klaus, and Sunny Sham.”

“Neihab!” Sunny shrieked, which meant “I’m Sunny Baudelaire, and I will always be Sunny Baudelaire unless I decide for myself to legally change my name!”

“When we explain that you forced Aunt Josephine to write that note,” Violet said, “Mr. Poe will rip up those adoption papers into a thousand pieces.”

“Mr. Poe won’t believe you,” Captain Sham said, chuckling. “Why should he believe three runaway pipsqueaks who go around stealing boats?”

“Because we’re telling the truth!” Klaus cried.

“Truth, schmuth,” Captain Sham said. If you don’t care about something, one way to demonstrate your feelings is to say the word and then repeat the word with the letters S-C-H-M replacing the real first letters. Somebody who didn’t care about dentists, for instance, could say “Dentists, schmentists.” But only a despicable person like Captain Sham wouldn’t care about the truth. “Truth, schmuth,” he said again. “I think Mr. Poe is more likely to believe the owner of a respectable sailboat rental place, who went out in the middle of a hurricane to rescue three ungrateful boat thieves.”

“We only stole the boat,” Violet said, “to retrieve Aunt Josephine from her hiding place so she could tell everyone about your terrible plan.”

“But nobody will believe the old woman, either,” Captain Sham said impatiently. “Nobody believes a dead woman.”

“Are you blind in *both* eyes?” Klaus asked. “Aunt Josephine isn’t dead!”

Captain Sham smiled again, and looked out at the lake. Just a few yards away the water was rippling as the Lachrymose Leeches swam toward Captain Sham’s sailboat. After searching every inch of the Baudelaires’ boat and failing to find any food, the leeches had realized they had been tricked and were once again following the scent of banana still lingering on Aunt Josephine. “She’s not dead *yet*,” Captain Sham said, in a terrible voice, and took a step toward her.

“Oh no,” she said. Her eyes were wide with fear. “Don’t throw me overboard,” she pleaded. “*Please*!”

“You’re not going to reveal my plan to Mr. Poe,” Captain Sham said, taking another step toward the terrified woman, “because you will be joining your beloved Ike at the bottom of the lake.”

“No she won’t,” Violet said, grabbing a rope. “I will steer us to shore before you can do anything about it.”

“I’ll help,” Klaus said, running to the back and grabbing the tiller.

“Igal!” Sunny shrieked, which meant something along the lines of “And I’ll guard Aunt Josephine.” She crawled in front of the Baudelaires’ guardian and bared her teeth at Captain Sham.

“I promise not to say anything to Mr. Poe!” Aunt Josephine said desperately. “I’ll go someplace and hide away, and never show my face! You can tell him I’m dead! You can have the fortune! You can have the children! Just don’t throw me to the leeches!”

The Baudelaires looked at their guardian in horror. “You’re supposed to be caring for us,” Violet told Aunt Josephine in astonishment, “not putting us up for grabs!”

Captain Sham paused, and seemed to consider Aunt Josephine’s offer. “You have a point,” he said. “I don’t necessarily have to kill you. People just have to *think* that you’re dead.”

“I’ll change my name!” Aunt Josephine said. “I’ll dye my hair! I’ll wear colored contact lenses! And I’ll go very, very far away! Nobody will ever hear from me!”

“But what about us, Aunt Josephine?” Klaus asked in horror. “What about *us*?”

“Be quiet, orphan,” Captain Sham snapped. The Lachrymose Leeches reached the sailboat and began tapping on the wooden side. “The adults are talking. Now, old woman, I wish I could believe you. But you hadn’t been a very trustworthy person.”

“*Haven’t* been,” Aunt Josephine corrected, wiping a tear from her eye.

“What?” Captain Sham asked.

“You made a grammatical error,” Aunt Josephine said. “You said ‘But you hadn’t been a very trustworthy person,’ but you should have said, ‘you *haven’t* been a very trustworthy person.’”

Captain Sham’s one shiny eye blinked, and his mouth curled up in a terrible smile. “Thank you for pointing that out,” he said, and took one last step toward Aunt Josephine. Sunny growled at him, and he looked down and in one swift gesture moved his peg leg and knocked Sunny to the other end of his boat. “Let me make sure I completely understand the grammatical lesson," he said to the Baudelaires' trembling guardian, as if nothing had happened. "You wouldn't say 'Josephine Anwhistle *had* been thrown overboard to the leeches,' because that would be incorrect. But if you said 'Josephine Anwhistle *has* been thrown overboard to the leeches,' that would be all right with you."

"Yes," Aunt Josephine said. "I mean *no*. I mean—"

But Aunt Josephine never got to say what she meant. Captain Sham faced her and, using both hands, pushed her over the side of the boat. With a little gasp and a big splash she fell into the waters of Lake Lachrymose.

"*Aunt Josephine*!" Violet cried. "*Aunt Josephine*!"

Klaus leaned over the side of the boat and stretched his hand out as far as he could. Thanks to her two life jackets, Aunt Josephine was floating on top of the water, waving her hands in the air as the leeches swam toward her. But Captain Sham was already pulling at the ropes of the sail, and Klaus couldn't reach her. "You *fiend*!" he shouted at Captain Sham. "You evil fiend!"

"That's no way to talk to your father," Captain Sham said calmly.

Violet tried to tug a rope out of Captain Sham's hand. "Move the sailboat back!" she shouted. "Turn the boat around!"

"Not a chance," he replied smoothly. "Wave good-bye to the old woman, orphans. You'll never see her again."

Klaus leaned over as far as he could. "Don't worry, Aunt Josephine!" he called, but his voice revealed that he was very worried himself. The boat was already quite a ways from Aunt Josephine, and the orphans could only see the white of her hands as she waved them over the dark water.

"She has a chance," Violet said quietly to Klaus as they sailed toward the dock. "She has those life jackets, and she's a strong swimmer."

“That’s true,” Klaus said, his voice shaky and sad. “She’s lived by the lake her whole life. Maybe she knows of an escape route.”

“Legru,” Sunny said quietly, which meant “All we can do is hope.”

The three orphans huddled together, shivering in cold and fear, as Captain Sham sailed the boat by himself. They didn’t dare do anything but hope. Their feelings for Aunt Josephine were all a tumble in their minds. The Baudelaires had not really enjoyed most of their time with her—not because she cooked horrible cold meals, or chose presents for them that they didn’t like, or always corrected the children’s grammar, but because she was so afraid of everything that she made it impossible to really enjoy anything at all. And the worst of it was, Aunt Josephine’s fear had made her a bad guardian. A guardian is supposed to stay with children and keep them safe, but Aunt Josephine had run away at the first sign of danger. A guardian is supposed to help children in times of trouble, but Aunt Josephine practically had to be dragged out of the Curdled Cave when they needed her. And a guardian is supposed to protect children from danger, but Aunt Josephine had offered the orphans to Captain Sham in exchange for her own safety.

But despite all of Aunt Josephine’s faults, the orphans still cared about her. She had taught them many things, even if most of them were boring. She had provided a home, even if it was cold and unable to withstand hurricanes. And the children knew that Aunt Josephine, like the Baudelaires themselves, had experienced some terrible things in her life. So as their guardian faded from view and the lights of Damocles Dock approached closer and closer, Violet, Klaus, and Sunny did not think “Josephine, schmosephine.” They thought “We hope Aunt Josephine is safe.”

Captain Sham sailed the boat right up to the shore and tied it expertly to the dock. “Come along, little idiots,” he said, and led the Baudelaires to the tall metal gate with the glistening spikes on top, where Mr. Poe was waiting with his handkerchief in his hand and a look of relief on his face. Next to Mr. Poe was the Brobdingnagian creature, who gazed at them with a triumphant expression on his or her face.

“You’re safe!” Mr. Poe said. “Thank goodness! We were so worried about you! When Captain Sham and I reached the Anwhistle home and saw that it had fallen into the sea, we thought you were done for!”

“It is lucky my associate told me that they had stolen a sailboat,” Captain Sham told Mr. Poe. “The boat was nearly destroyed by Hurricane Herman, and by a swarm of leeches. I rescued them just in time.”

“He did not!” Violet shouted. “He threw Aunt Josephine into the lake! We have to go and rescue her!”

“The children are upset and confused,” Captain Sham said, his eye shining. “As their father, I think they need a good night’s sleep.”

“He’s not our father!” Klaus shouted. “He’s Count Olaf, and he’s a murderer! Please, Mr. Poe, alert the police! We have to save Aunt Josephine!”

“Oh, dear,” Mr. Poe said, coughing into his handkerchief. “You certainly *are* confused, Klaus. Aunt Josephine is dead, remember? She threw herself out the window.”

“No, no,” Violet said. “Her suicide note had a secret message in it. Klaus decoded the note and it said ‘Curdled Cave.’ Actually, it said ‘apostrophe Curdled Cave,’ but the apostrophe was just to get our attention.”

“You’re not making any sense,” Mr. Poe said. “What cave? What apostrophe?”

“Klaus,” Violet said, “show Mr. Poe the note.”

“You can show it to him in the morning,” Captain Sham said, in a falsely soothing tone. “You need a good night’s sleep. My associate will take you to my apartment while I stay here and finish the adoption paperwork with Mr. Poe.”

“But—” Klaus said.

“But nothing,” Captain Sham said. “You’re very distraught, which means ‘upset.’”

“I *know* what it means,” Klaus said.

“*Please* listen to us,” Violet begged Mr. Poe. “It’s a matter of life or death. *Please* just take a look at the note.”

“You can show it to him,” Captain Sham said, his voice rising in anger, “*in the morning*. Now please follow my associate to my minivan and go straight to bed.”

“Hold on a minute, Captain Sham,” Mr. Poe said. “If it upsets the children so much, I’ll take a look at the note. It will only take a moment.”

“Thank you,” Klaus said in relief, and reached into his pocket for the note. But as soon as he reached inside his face fell in disappointment, and I’m sure you can guess why. If you place a piece of paper in your pocket, and then soak yourself in a hurricane, the piece of paper, no matter how important it is, will turn into a soggy mess. Klaus pulled a damp lump out of his pocket, and the orphans looked at the remains of Aunt Josephine’s note. You could scarcely tell that it had been a piece of paper, let alone read the note or the secret it contained.

“This *was* the note,” Klaus said, holding it out to Mr. Poe. “You’ll just have to take our word for it that Aunt Josephine was still alive.”

“And she might *still* be alive!” Violet cried. “*Please*, Mr. Poe, send someone to rescue her!”

“Oh my, children,” Mr. Poe said. “You’re so sad and worried. But you don’t have to worry anymore. I have always promised to provide for you, and I think Captain Sham will do an excellent job of raising you. He has a steady business and doesn’t seem likely to throw himself out of a window. And it’s obvious he cares for you very much—why, he went out alone, in the middle of a hurricane, to search for you.”

“The only thing he cares about,” Klaus said bitterly, “is our fortune.”

“Why, that’s not true,” Captain Sham said. “I don’t want a penny of your fortune. Except, of course, to pay for the sailboat you stole and wrecked.”

Mr. Poe frowned, and coughed into his handkerchief. “Well, that’s a surprising request,” he said, “but I suppose that can be arranged. Now, children, please go to your new home while I make the final arrangements with Captain Sham. Perhaps we’ll have time for breakfast tomorrow before I head back to the city.”

“*Please*,” Violet cried. “*Please*, won’t you listen to us?”

“*Please*,” Klaus cried. “*Please*, won’t you believe us?”

Sunny did not say anything. Sunny had not said anything for a long time, and if her siblings hadn’t been so busy trying to reason with Mr. Poe, they would have noticed that she wasn’t even looking up to watch everyone talking. During this whole conversation, Sunny was looking straight ahead, and if you are a baby this means looking at people’s legs. The leg she was looking at was Captain Sham’s. She wasn’t looking at his right leg, which was perfectly normal, but at his peg leg. She was looking at the stump of dark polished wood, attached to his left knee with a curved metal hinge, and concentrating very hard.

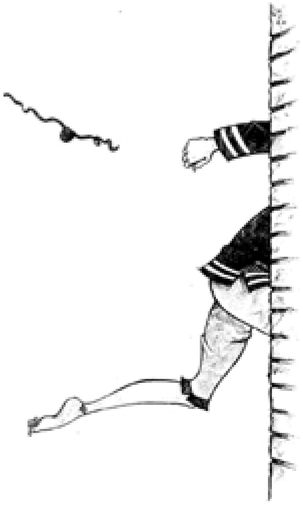
It may surprise you to learn that at this moment, Sunny resembled the famous Greek conqueror Alexander the Great. Alexander the Great lived more than two thousand years ago, and his last name was not actually “The Great.” “The Great” was something that he forced people to call him, by bringing a bunch of soldiers into their land and proclaiming himself king. Besides invading other people’s countries and forcing them to do whatever he said, Alexander the Great was famous for something called the Gordian Knot. The Gordian Knot was a fancy knot tied in a piece of rope by a king named Gordius. Gordius said that if Alexander could untie it, he could rule the whole kingdom. But Alexander, who was too busy conquering places to learn how to untie knots, simply drew his sword and cut the Gordian Knot in two. This was cheating, of course, but Alexander had too many soldiers for Gordius to argue, and soon everybody in Gordium had to bow down to You-Know-Who the Great. Ever since then, a difficult problem can be called a Gordian Knot, and if you solve the problem in a simple way—even if the way is rude—you are cutting the Gordian Knot.

The problem the Baudelaire orphans were experiencing could certainly be called a Gordian Knot, because it looked impossible to solve. The problem, of course, was that Captain Sham's despicable plan was about to succeed, and the way to solve it was to convince Mr. Poe of what was really going on. But with Aunt Josephine thrown in the lake, and her note a ruined lump of wet paper, Violet and Klaus were unable to convince Mr. Poe of anything. Sunny, however, stared at Captain Sham's peg leg and thought of a simple, if rude, way of solving the problem.

As all the taller people argued and paid no attention to Sunny, the littlest Baudelaire crawled as close as she could to the peg leg, opened her mouth and bit down as hard as she could. Luckily for the Baudelaires, Sunny's teeth were as sharp as the sword of Alexander the Great, and Captain Sham's peg leg split right in half with a *crack*! that made everybody look down.

As I'm sure you've guessed, the peg leg was fake, and it split open to reveal Captain Sham's real leg, pale and sweaty from knee to toes. But it was neither the knee nor the toes that interested everyone. It was the ankle. For there on the pale and sweaty skin of Captain Sham was the solution to their problem. By biting the peg leg, Sunny had cut the Gordian Knot, for as the wooden pieces of fake peg leg fell to the floor of Damocles Dock, everyone could see a tattoo of an eye.

CHAPTER
Thirteen



Mr. Poe looked astonished. Violet looked relieved. Klaus looked assuaged, which is a fancy word for “relieved” that he had learned by reading a magazine article. Sunny looked triumphant. The person who looked like neither a man nor a woman looked disappointed. And Count Olaf—it is such a relief to call him by his true name—at first looked afraid, but in a blink of his one shiny eye, he twisted his face to make it look as astonished as Mr. Poe’s.

“My leg!” Count Olaf cried, in a voice of false joy. “My leg has grown back! It’s amazing! It’s wonderful! It’s a medical miracle!”

“Oh come now,” Mr. Poe said, folding his arms. “That won’t work. Even a child can see that your peg leg was false.”

“A child *did* see it,” Violet whispered to Klaus. “*Three* children, in fact.”

“Well, maybe the peg leg was false,” Count Olaf admitted, and took a step backward. “But I’ve never seen this tattoo in my life.”

“Oh come now,” Mr. Poe said again. “That won’t work, either. You tried to hide the tattoo with the peg leg, but now we can see that you are really Count Olaf.”

“Well, maybe the tattoo is mine,” Count Olaf admitted, and took another step backward. “But I’m not this Count Olaf person. I’m Captain Sham. See, I have a business card here that says so.”

“Oh come now,” Mr. Poe said yet again. “That won’t work. Anyone can go to a print shop and have cards made that say anything they like.”

“Well, maybe I’m not Captain Sham,” Count Olaf admitted, “but the children still belong to me. Josephine said that they did.”

“Oh come now,” Mr. Poe said for the fourth and final time. “That won’t work. Aunt Josephine left the children to Captain Sham, not to Count Olaf. And you are Count Olaf, not Captain Sham. So it is once again up to me to decide who will care for the Baudelaires. I will send these three youngsters somewhere else, and I will send you to jail. You have performed your evil deeds for the last time, Olaf. You tried to steal the Baudelaire fortune by marrying Violet. You tried to steal the Baudelaire fortune by murdering Uncle Monty.”

“And this,” Count Olaf growled, “was my greatest plan yet.” He reached up and tore off his eyepatch—which was fake, of course, like his peg leg—and stared at the Baudelaires with both of his shiny eyes. “I don’t like to brag—actually, why should I lie to you fools anymore?—I *love* to brag, and forcing that stupid old woman to write that note was really something to brag about. What a ninny Josephine was!”

“She was not a ninny!” Klaus cried. “She was kind and sweet!”

“*Sweet*?” Count Olaf repeated, with a horrible smile. “Well, at this very moment the Lachrymose Leeches are probably finding her very sweet indeed. She might be the sweetest breakfast they ever ate.”

Mr. Poe frowned, and coughed into his white handkerchief. “That’s enough of your revolting talk, Olaf,” he said sternly. “We’ve caught you now, and there’s no way you’ll be getting away. The Lake Lachrymose Police Department will be happy to capture a known criminal wanted for fraud, murder, and the endangerment of children.”

“And arson,” Count Olaf piped up.

“*I said that’s enough,*” Mr. Poe growled. Count Olaf, the Baudelaire orphans, and even the massive creature looked surprised that Mr. Poe had spoken so sternly. “You have preyed upon these children for the last time, and I am making absolutely sure that you are handed over to the proper authorities. Disguising yourself won’t work. Telling lies won’t work. In fact there’s nothing at all you can do about your situation.”

“Really?” Count Olaf said, and his filthy lips curved up in a smile. “I can think of something that I can do.”

“And what,” said Mr. Poe, “is that?”

Count Olaf looked at each one of the Baudelaire orphans, giving each one a smile as if the children were tiny chocolates he was saving to eat for later. Then he smiled at the massive creature, and then, slowly, he smiled at Mr. Poe. “I can run,” he said, and ran. Count Olaf ran, with the massive creature lumbering behind him, in the direction of the heavy metal gate.

“Get back here!” Mr. Poe shouted. “Get back here in the name of the law! Get back here in the name of justice and righteousness! Get back here in the name of Mulctuary Money Management!”

“We can’t just shout at them!” Violet shouted. “Come on! We have to chase them!”

“I’m not going to allow children to chase after a man like that,” Mr. Poe said, and called out again, “Stop, I say! Stop right there!”

“We can’t let them escape!” Klaus cried. “Come on, Violet! Come on, Sunny!”

“No, no, this is no job for children,” Mr. Poe said. “Wait here with your sisters, Klaus. I’ll retrieve them. They won’t get away from Mr. Poe. *You, there! Stop!*”

“But we can’t wait here!” Violet cried. “We have to get into a sailboat and look for Aunt Josephine! She may still be alive!”

“You Baudelaire children are under my care,” Mr. Poe said firmly. “I’m not going to let small children sail around unaccompanied.”

“But if we hadn’t sailed unaccompanied,” Klaus pointed out, “we’d be in Count Olaf’s clutches by now!”

“That’s not the point,” Mr. Poe said, and began to walk quickly toward Count Olaf and the creature. “The point is—”

But the children didn’t hear the point over the loud *slam*! of the tall metal gate. The creature had slammed it shut just as Mr. Poe had reached it.

“Stop immediately!” Mr. Poe ordered, calling through the gate. “Come back here, you unpleasant person!” He tried to open the tall gate and found it locked. “It’s locked!” he cried to the children. “Where is the key? We must find the key!”

The Baudelaires rushed to the gate but stopped as they heard a jingling sound. “I have the key,” said Count Olaf’s voice, from the other side of the gate. “But don’t worry. I’ll see you soon, orphans. *Very soon*.”

“Open this gate immediately!” Mr. Poe shouted, but of course nobody opened the gate. He shook it and shook it, but the spiky metal gate never opened. Mr. Poe hurried to a phone booth and called the police, but the children knew that by the time help arrived Count Olaf would be long gone. Utterly exhausted and more than utterly miserable, the Baudelaire orphans sank to the ground, sitting glumly in the very same spot where we found them at the beginning of this story.

In the first chapter, you will remember, the Baudelaires were sitting on their suitcases, hoping that their lives were about to get a little bit better, and I wish I could tell you, here at the end of the story, that it was so. I wish I could write that Count Olaf was captured as he tried to flee, or that Aunt Josephine came swimming up to Damocles Dock, having miraculously escaped from the Lachrymose Leeches. But it was not so. As the children sat on the damp ground, Count Olaf was already halfway across the lake and would soon be on board a train, disguised as a rabbi to fool the police, and I'm sorry to tell you that he was already concocting another scheme to steal the Baudelaire fortune. And we can never know exactly what was happening to Aunt Josephine as the children sat on the dock, unable to help her, but I will say that eventually—about the time when the Baudelaire orphans were forced to attend a miserable boarding school—two fishermen found both of Aunt Josephine's life jackets, all in tatters and floating alone in the murky waters of Lake Lachrymose.

In most stories, as you know, the villain would be defeated, there would be a happy ending, and everybody would go home knowing the moral of the story. But in the case of the Baudelaires everything was wrong. Count Olaf, the villain, had not succeeded with his evil plan, but he certainly hadn't been defeated, either. You certainly couldn't say that there was a happy ending. And the Baudelaires could not go home knowing the moral of the story, for the simple reason that they could not go home at all. Not only had Aunt Josephine's house fallen into the lake, but the Baudelaires' real home—the house where they had lived with their parents—was just a pile of ashes in a vacant lot, and they couldn't go back there no matter how much they wanted to.

But even if they could go home it would be difficult for me to tell you what the moral of the story is. In some stories, it's easy. The moral of "The Three Bears," for instance, is "Never break into someone else's house." The moral of "Snow White" is "Never eat apples." The moral of World War One is "Never assassinate Archduke Ferdinand." But Violet, Klaus, and Sunny sat on the dock and watched the sun come up over Lake Lachrymose and wondered exactly what the moral was of their time with Aunt Josephine.

The expression "It dawned on them," which I am about to use, does not have anything to do with the sunlight spreading out over Damocles Dock. "It dawned on them" simply means "They figured something out," and as the Baudelaire orphans sat and watched the dock fill with people as the business of the day began, they figured out something that was very important to them. It dawned on them that unlike Aunt Josephine, who had lived up in that house, sad and alone, the three children had one another for comfort and support over the course of their miserable lives. And while this did not make them feel entirely safe, or entirely happy, it made them feel appreciative.

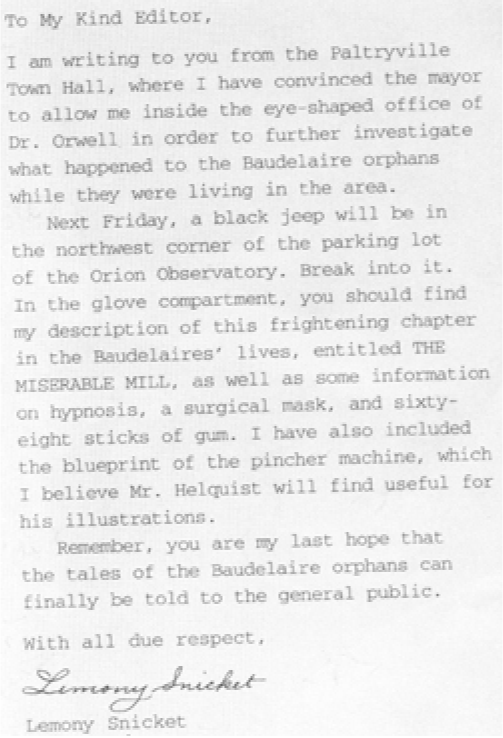
“Thank you, Klaus,” Violet said appreciatively, “for figuring out that note. And thank you, Sunny, for stealing the keys to the sailboat. If it weren’t for the two of you we would now be in Count Olaf’s clutches.”

“Thank you, Violet,” Klaus said appreciatively, “for thinking of the peppermints to gain us some time. And thank you, Sunny, for biting the peg leg just at the right moment. If it weren’t for the two of you, we would now be doomed.”

“Pilums,” Sunny said appreciatively, and her siblings understood at once that she was thanking Violet for inventing the signaling device, and thanking Klaus for reading the atlas and guiding them to Curdled Cave.

They leaned up against one another appreciatively, and small smiles appeared on their damp and anxious faces. They had each other. I’m not sure that “The Baudelaires had each other” is the moral of this story, but to the three siblings it was enough. To have each other in the midst of their unfortunate lives felt like having a sailboat in the middle of a hurricane, and to the Baudelaire orphans this felt very fortunate indeed.

To My Kind Editor



To My Kind Editor,

I am writing to you from the Paltryville Town Hall, where I have convinced the mayor to allow me inside the eye-shaped office of Dr. Orwell in order to further investigate what happened to the Baudelaire orphans while they were living in the area.

Next Friday, a black jeep will be in the northwest corner of the parking lot of the Orion Observatory. Break into it. In the glove compartment, you should find my description of this frightening chapter in the Baudelaires' lives, entitled THE MISERABLE MILL, as well as some information on hypnosis, a surgical mask, and sixty-eight sticks of gum. I have also included the blueprint of the pincher machine, which I believe Mr. Helquist will find useful for his illustrations.

Remember, you are my last hope that the tales of the Baudelaire orphans can finally be told to the general public.

With all due respect,

Lemony Snicket

Lemony Snicket

A Series of Unfortunate Events

THE BAD BEGINNING

THE REPTILE ROOM

THE WIDE WINDOW

THE MISERABLE MILL

THE AUSTERE ACADEMY

THE ERSATZ ELEVATOR

THE VILE VILLAGE

THE HOSTILE HOSPITAL

THE CARNIVOROUS CARNIVAL

THE SLIPPERY SLOPE

Credits

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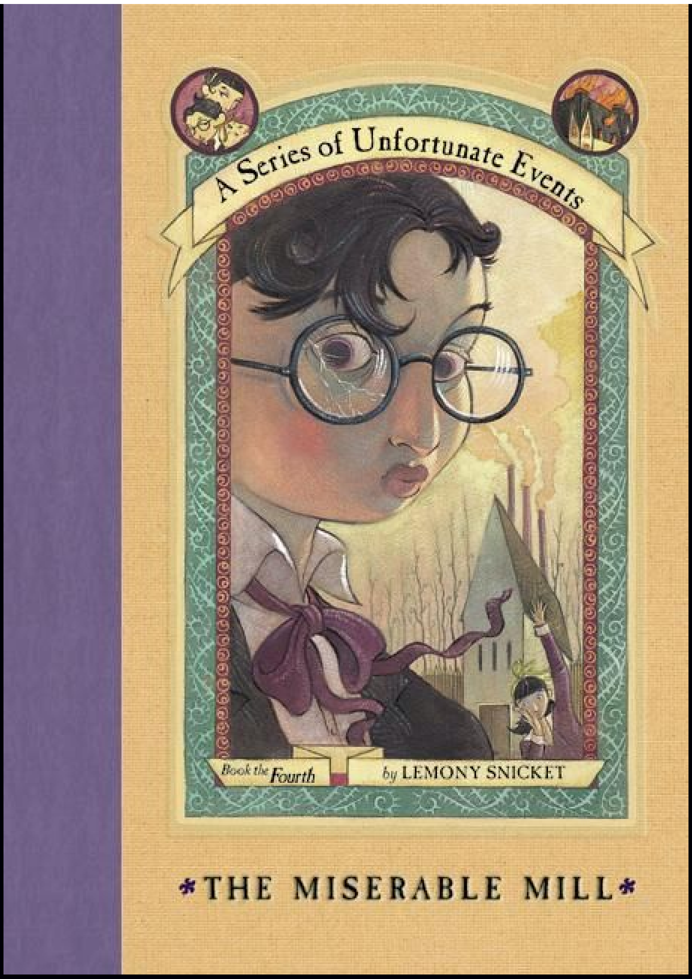
A Series of Unfortunate Events
Book the Fourth
by LEMONY SNICKET
THE MISERABLE MILL

A Series of Unfortunate Events

BOOK the Fourth

THE MISERABLE MILL

by **LEMONY SNICKET**

Illustrations by **Brett Helquist**

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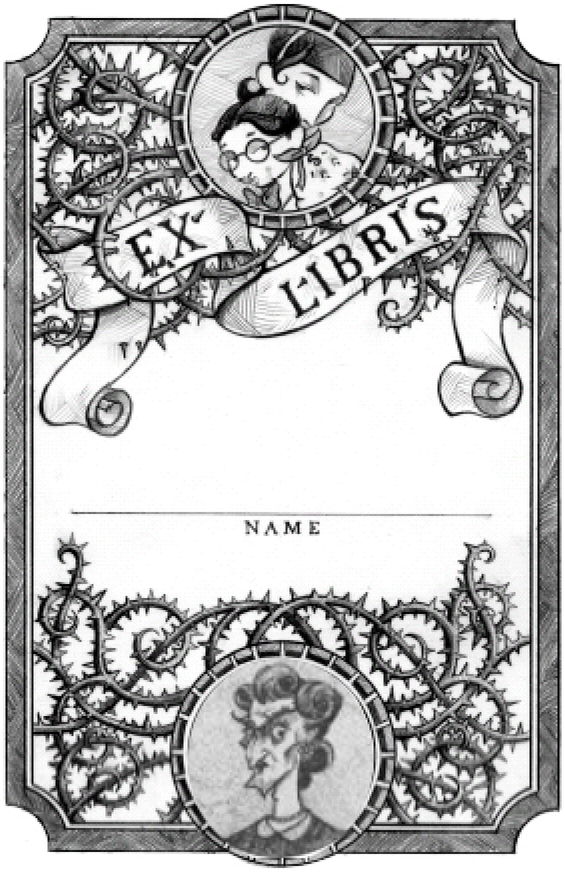
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NAME

***Dear Reader*,**

I hope, for your sake, that you have not chosen to read this book because you are in the mood for a pleasant experience. If this is the case, I advise you to put this book down instantaneously, because of all the books describing the unhappy lives of the Baudelaire orphans, THE MISERABLE MILL might be the unhappiest yet. Violet, Klaus, and Sunny Baudelaire are sent to Paltryville to work in a lumbermill, and they find disaster and misfortune lurking behind every log.

The pages of this book, I’m sorry to inform you, contain such unpleasantries as a giant pincher machine, a bad casserole, a man with a cloud of smoke where his head should be, a hypnotist, a terrible accident resulting in injury, and coupons.

I have promised to write down the entire history of these three poor children, but you haven’t, so if you prefer stories that are more heartwarming, please feel free to make another selection.

With all due respect,

Lemony Snicket

Lemony Snicket

A Series of Unfortunate Events
LEMONY SNICKET

To Beatrice—

My love flew like a butterfly
Until death swooped down like a bat
As the poet Emma Montana McElroy said:
“That’s the end of that.”

FINANCE

CHAPTER
One

Sometime during your life—in fact, very soon—you may find yourself reading a book, and you may notice that a book's first sentence can often tell you what sort of story your book contains. For instance, a book that began with the sentence "Once upon a time there was a family of cunning little chipmunks who lived in a hollow tree" would probably contain a story full of talking animals who get into all sorts of mischief. A book that began with the sentence "Emily sat down and looked at the stack of blueberry pancakes her mother had prepared for her, but she was too nervous about Camp Timbertops to eat a bite" would probably contain a story full of giggly girls who have a grand old time. And a book that began with the sentence "Gary smelled the leather of his brand-new catcher's mitt and waited impatiently for his best friend Larry to come around the corner" would probably contain a story full of sweaty boys who win some sort of trophy. And if you liked mischief, a grand old time, or trophies, you would know which book to read, and you could throw the rest of them away.

But this book begins with the sentence "The Baudelaire orphans looked out the grimy window of the train and gazed at the gloomy blackness of the Finite Forest, wondering if their lives would ever get any better," and you should be able to tell that the story that follows will be very different from the story of Gary or Emily or the family of cunning little chipmunks. And this is for the simple reason that the lives of Violet, Klaus, and Sunny Baudelaire are very different from most people's lives, with the main difference being the amount of unhappiness, horror, and despair. The three children have no time to get into all sorts of mischief, because misery follows them wherever they go. They have not had a grand old time since their parents died in a terrible fire. And the only trophy they would win would be some sort of First Prize for Wretchedness. It is atrociously unfair, of course, that the Baudelaires have so many troubles, but that is the way the story goes. So now that I've told you that the first sentence will be "The Baudelaire orphans looked out the grimy window of the train and gazed at the gloomy blackness of the Finite Forest, wondering if their lives would ever get any better," if you wish to avoid an unpleasant story you had best put this book down.

The Baudelaire orphans looked out the grimy window of the train and gazed at the gloomy blackness of the Finite Forest, wondering if their lives would ever get any better. An announcement over a crackly loudspeaker had just told them that in a few minutes they would arrive in the town of Paltryville, where their new caretaker lived, and they couldn't help wondering who in the world would want to live in such dark and eerie countryside. Violet, who was fourteen and the eldest Baudelaire, looked out at the trees of the forest, which were very tall and had practically no branches, so they looked almost like metal pipes instead of trees. Violet was an inventor, and was always designing machines and devices in her head, with her hair tied up in a ribbon to help her think, and as she gazed out at the trees she began work on a mechanism that would allow you to climb to the top of any tree, even if it were completely bare. Klaus, who was twelve, looked down at the forest floor, which was covered in brown, patchy moss. Klaus liked to read more than anything else, and he tried to remember what he had read about Paltryville mosses and whether any of them were edible. And Sunny, who was just an infant, looked out at the smoky gray sky that hung over the forest like a damp sweater. Sunny had four sharp teeth, and biting things with them was what interested her most, and she was eager to see what there was available to bite in the area. But even as Violet began planning her invention, and Klaus thought of his moss research, and Sunny opened and closed her mouth as a prebiting exercise, the Finite Forest looked so uninspiring that they couldn't help wondering if their new home would really be a pleasant one.

“What a lovely forest!” Mr. Poe remarked, and coughed into a white handkerchief. Mr. Poe was a banker who had been in charge of managing the Baudelaire affairs since the fire, and I must tell you that he was not doing a very good job. His two main duties were finding the orphans a good home and protecting the enormous fortune that the children’s parents had left behind, and so far each home had been a catastrophe, a word which here means “an utter disaster involving tragedy, deception, and Count Olaf.” Count Olaf was a terrible man who wanted the Baudelaire fortune for himself, and tried every disgusting scheme he could think of to steal it. Time after time he had come very close to succeeding, and time after time the Baudelaire orphans had revealed his plan, and time after time he had escaped—and all Mr. Poe had ever done was cough. Now he was accompanying the children to Paltryville, and it pains me to tell you that once again Count Olaf would appear with yet another disgusting scheme, and that Mr. Poe would once again fail to do anything even remotely helpful. “What a lovely forest!” Mr. Poe said again, when he was done coughing. “I think you children will have a good home here. I hope you do, anyway, because I’ve just received a promotion at Mulctuary Money Management. I’m now the Vice President in Charge of Coins, and from now on I will be busier than ever. If anything goes wrong with you here, I will have to send you to boarding school until I have time to find you another home, so please be on your best behavior.”

“Of course, Mr. Poe,” Violet said, not adding that she and her siblings had always been on their best behavior but that it hadn’t done them any good.

“What is our new caretaker’s name?” Klaus asked. “You haven’t told us.”

Mr. Poe took a piece of paper out of his pocket and squinted at it. “His name is Mr. Wuz—Mr. Qui—I can’t pronounce it. It’s very long and complicated.”

“Can I see?” Klaus asked. “Maybe I can figure out how to pronounce it.”

“No, no,” Mr. Poe said, putting the paper away. “If it’s too complicated for an adult, it’s much too complicated for a child.”

“Ghand!” Sunny shrieked. Like many infants, Sunny spoke mostly in sounds that were often difficult to translate. This time she probably meant something like “But Klaus reads many complicated books!”

“He’ll tell you what to call him,” Mr. Poe continued, as if Sunny had not spoken. “You’ll find him at the main office of the Lucky Smells Lumbermill, which I’m told is a short walk from the train station.”

“Aren’t you coming with us?” Violet asked.

“No,” Mr. Poe said, and coughed again into his handkerchief. “The train only stops at Paltryville once a day, so if I got off the train I would have to stay overnight and I’d miss another day at the bank. I’m just dropping you off here and heading right back into the city.”

The Baudelaire orphans looked worriedly out the window. They weren’t very happy about just being dropped off in a strange place, as if they were a pizza being delivered instead of three children all alone in the world.

“What if Count Olaf shows up?” Klaus asked quietly. “He swore he’d find us again.”

“I have given Mr. Bek—Mr. Duy—I have given your new caretaker a complete description of Count Olaf,” said Mr. Poe. “So if by some stretch of the imagination he shows up in Paltryville, Mr. Sho—Mr. Gek—will notify the authorities.”

“But Count Olaf is always in disguise,” Violet pointed out. “It’s often difficult to recognize him. Just about the only way you can tell it’s him is if you see that tattoo of an eye that he has on his ankle.”

“I included the tattoo in my description,” Mr. Poe said impatiently.

“But what about Count Olaf’s assistants?” Klaus asked. “He usually brings at least one of them with him, to help out with his treachery.”

“I described all of them to Mr.—I have described all of them to the owner of the mill,” Mr. Poe said, holding a finger up as he counted off Olaf’s horrible associates. “The hook-handed man. The bald man with the long nose. Two women with white powder all over their faces. And that rather chubby one who looks like neither a man nor a woman. Your new guardian is aware of them all, and if there’s any problem, remember you can always contact me or any of my associates at Mulctuary Money Management.”

“Casca,” Sunny said glumly. She probably meant something like “That’s not very reassuring,” but nobody heard her over the sound of the train whistle as they arrived at Paltryville Station.

“Here we are,” Mr. Poe said, and before the children knew it they were standing in the station, watching the train pull away into the dark trees of the Finite Forest. The clattering noise of the train engine got softer and softer as the train raced out of sight, and soon the three siblings were all alone indeed.

“Well,” Violet said, picking up the small bag that contained the children’s few clothes, “let’s find the Lucky Smells Lumbermill. Then we can meet our new caretaker.”

“Or at least learn his name,” Klaus said glumly, and took Sunny’s hand.

If you are ever planning a vacation, you may find it useful to acquire a guidebook, which is a book listing interesting and pleasant places to visit and giving helpful hints about what to do when you arrive. Paltryville is not listed in any guidebook, and as the Baudelaire orphans trudged down Paltryville’s one street, they instantly saw why. There were a few small shops on either side of the street, but none of them had any windows. There was a post office, but instead of a flag flying from the flagpole, there was only an old shoe dangling from the top of it, and across from the post office was a high wooden wall that ran all the way to the end of the street. In the middle of the wall was a tall gate, also made of wood, with the words “Lucky Smells Lumbermill” written on it in letters that looked rough and slimy. Alongside the sidewalk, where a row of trees might have been, were towering stacks of old newspapers instead. In short, everything that might make a town interesting or pleasant had been made boring or unpleasant, and if Paltryville had been listed in a guidebook the only helpful hint about what to do when you got there would be: “Leave.” But the three youngsters couldn’t leave, of course, and with a sigh Violet led her younger siblings to the wooden gate. She was about to knock when Klaus touched her on the shoulder and said, “Look.”

“I know,” she said. Violet thought he was talking about the letters spelling out “Lucky Smells Lumbermill.” Now that they were standing at the gate, the children could see why the letters looked rough and slimy: they were made out of wads and wads of chewed-up gum, just stuck on the gate in the shapes of letters. Other than a sign I saw once that said “Beware” in letters made of dead monkeys, the “Lucky Smells Lumbermill” sign was the most disgusting sign on earth, and Violet thought her brother was pointing that out. But when she turned to agree with him, she saw he wasn’t looking at the sign, but down to the far end of the street.

“Look,” Klaus said again, but Violet had already seen what he was looking at. The two of them stood there without speaking a word, staring hard at the building at the end of Paltryville’s one street. Sunny had been examining some of the teeth marks in the gum, but when her siblings fell silent she looked up and saw it, too. For a few seconds the Baudelaire orphans just looked.

“It must be a coincidence,” Violet said, after a long pause.

“Of course,” Klaus said nervously, “a coincidence.”

“Varni,” Sunny agreed, but she didn’t believe it. None of the orphans did. Now that the children had reached the mill, they could see another building, at the far end of the street. Like the other buildings in town, it had no windows, just a round door in the center. But it was the way the building was shaped, and how it was painted, that made the Baudelaires stare. The building was a sort of oval shape, with curved, skinny sticks sticking out of the top of it. Most of the oval was painted a brownish color, with a big circle of white inside the oval, and a smaller circle of green inside the white circle, and some little black steps led to a little round door that was painted black, so it looked like an even smaller circle inside the green one. The building had been made to look like an eye.

The three children looked at one another, and then at the building, and then at each other again, shaking their heads. Try as they might, they just couldn’t believe it was a coincidence that the town in which they were to live had a building that looked just like the tattoo of Count Olaf.

CHAPTER
Two

It is much, much worse to receive bad news through the written word than by somebody simply telling you, and I'm sure you understand why. When somebody simply tells you bad news, you hear it once, and that's the end of it. But when bad news is written down, whether in a letter or a newspaper or on your arm in felt tip pen, each time you read it, you feel as if you are receiving the news again and again. For instance, I once loved a woman, who for various reasons could not marry me. If she had simply told me in person, I would have been very sad, of course, but eventually it might have passed. However, she chose instead to write a two-hundred-page book, explaining every single detail of the bad news at great length, and instead my sadness has been of impossible depth. When the book was first brought to me, by a flock of carrier pigeons, I stayed up all night reading it, and I read it still, over and over, and it is as if my darling Beatrice is bringing me bad news every day and every night of my life.

The Baudelaire orphans knocked again and again on the wooden gate, taking care not to hit the chewed-up gum letters with their knuckles, but nobody answered, and at last they tried the gate themselves and found that it was unlocked. Behind the gate was a large courtyard with a dirt floor, and on the dirt floor was an envelope with the word "Baudelaires" typed on the front. Klaus picked up the envelope and opened it, and inside was a note that read as follows:

> ***Memorandum***
>
> ***To***:The Baudelaire Orphans
>
> ***From***:Lucky Smells Lumbermill
>
> ***Subject***: Your Arrival
>
> Enclosed you will find a map of the Lucky Smells Lumbermill, including the dormitory where the three of you will be staying, free of charge. Please report to work the following morning along with the other employees. The owner of Lucky Smells Lumbermill expects you to be both assiduous and diligent.

"What do those words mean, 'assiduous' and 'diligent'?" Violet asked, peering over Klaus's shoulder.

"'Assiduous' and 'diligent' both mean the same thing," said Klaus, who knew lots of impressive words from all the books he had read. "'Hardworking.'"

"But Mr. Poe didn't say anything about *working* in the the lumbermill," Violet said. "I thought we were just going to live here."

Klaus frowned at the hand-drawn map that was attached to the note with another wad of gum. "This map looks pretty easy to read," he said. "The dormitory is straight ahead, between the storage shed and the lumbermill itself."

Violet looked straight ahead and saw a gray windowless building on the other side of the courtyard. "I don't want to live," she said, "between the storage shed and the lumbermill itself."

"It doesn't sound like much fun," Klaus admitted, "but you never know. The mill might have complicated machines, and you would find it interesting to study them."

"That's true," Violet said. "You never know. It might have some hard wood, and Sunny would find it interesting to bite it."

"Snevi!" Sunny shrieked.

"And there might be some interesting lumbermill manuals for me to read," Klaus said. "You never know."

"That's right," Violet said. "You never know. This might be a wonderful place to live."

The three siblings looked at one another, and felt a little better. It is true, of course, that you never know. A new experience can be extremely pleasurable, or extremely irritating, or somewhere in between, and you never know until you try it out. And as the children began walking toward the gray, windowless building, they felt ready to try out their new home at the Lucky Smells Lumbermill, because you never know. But—and my heart aches as I tell you this—I always know. I know because I have been to the Lucky Smells Lumbermill, and learned of all the atrocious things that befell these poor orphans during the brief time they lived there. I know because I have talked to some of the people who were there at the time, and heard with my own ears the troublesome story of the children's stay in Paltryville. And I know because I have written down all the details in order to convey to you, the reader, just how miserable their experience was. I know, and this knowledge sits in my heart, heavy as a paperweight. I wish I could have been at the lumbermill when the Baudelaires were there, because they didn't know. I wish I could tell them what I know, as they walked across the courtyard, raising small clouds of dust with every step. They didn't know, but I know and I wish they knew, if you know what I mean.

When the Baudelaires reached the door of the gray building, Klaus took another look at the map, nodded his head, and knocked. After a long pause, the door creaked open and revealed a confused-looking man whose clothes were covered in sawdust. He stared at them for quite some time before speaking.

“No one has knocked on this door,” he said finally, “for fourteen years.”

Sometimes, when somebody says something so strange that you don’t know what to say in return, it is best to just politely say “How do you do?”

“How do you do?” Violet said politely. “I am Violet Baudelaire, and these are my siblings, Klaus and Sunny.”

The confused-looking man looked even more confused, and put his hands on his hips, brushing some of the sawdust off his shirt. “Are you sure you’re in the right place?” he asked.

“I think so,” Klaus said. “This is the dormitory at the Lucky Smells Lumbermill, isn’t it?”

“Yes,” the man said, “but we’re not allowed to have visitors.”

“We’re not visitors,” Violet replied. “We’re going to live here.”

The man scratched his head, and the Baudelaires watched as sawdust fell out of his messy gray hair. “You’re going to live *here*, at the Lucky Smells Lumbermill?”

“Cigam!” Sunny shrieked, which meant “Look at this note!”

Klaus gave the note to the man, who was careful not to touch the gum as he read it over. Then he looked down at the orphans with his tired, sawdust-sprinkled eyes. “You’re going to *work* here, too? Children, working in a lumber-mill is a very difficult job. Trees have to be stripped of their bark and sawed into narrow strips to make boards. The boards have to be tied together into stacks and loaded onto trucks. I must tell you that the majority of people who work in the lumber business are grown-ups. But if the owner says you’re working here, I guess you’re working here. You’d better come inside.”

The man opened the door further, and the Baudelaires stepped inside the dormitory. “My name’s Phil, by the way,” Phil said. “You can join us for dinner in a few minutes, but in the meantime I’ll give you a tour of the dormitory." Phil led the youngsters into a large, dimly lit room filled with bunk beds, standing in rows and rows on a cement floor. Sitting or lying down on the bunks were an assortment of people, men and women, all of whom looked tired and all of whom were covered in sawdust. They were sitting together in groups of four or five, playing cards, chatting quietly, or simply staring into space, and a few of them looked up with mild interest as the three siblings walked into the room. The whole place had a damp smell, a smell rooms get when the windows have not been opened for quite some time. Of course, in this case the windows had never been opened, because there weren't any windows, although the children could see that somebody had taken a ballpoint pen and drawn a few windows on the gray cement walls. The window drawings somehow made the room even more pathetic, a word which here means "depressing and containing no windows," and the Baudelaire orphans felt a lump in their throats just looking at it.

"This here is the room where we sleep," Phil said. "There's a bunk over there in the far corner that you three can have. You can store your bag underneath the bed. Through that door is the bathroom and down that hallway over there is the kitchen. That's pretty much the grand tour. Everyone, this is Violet, Klaus, and Sunny. They're going to work here."

"But they're *children*," one of the women said.

"I know," Phil said. "But the owner says they're going to work here, so they're going to work here."

"By the way," Klaus said, "what is the owner's name? Nobody has told us."

"I don't know," Phil said, stroking his dusty chin. "He hasn't visited the dormitory for six years or so. Does anybody remember the owner's name?"

"I think it's Mister something," one of the men said.

"You mean you never talk to him?" Violet asked.

"We never even see him," Phil said. "The owner lives in a house across from the storage shed, and only comes to the lumbermill for special occasions. We see the foreman all the time, but never the owner."

"Teruca?" Sunny asked, which probably meant "What's a foreman?"

"A foreman," Klaus explained, "is somebody who supervises workers. Is he nice, Phil?"

"He's *awful*!" one of the other men said, and some of the others took up the cry.

"He's *terrible*!"

"He's *disgusting*!"

"He's *revolting*!"

"He's *the worst foreman the world has ever seen*!"

"He is pretty bad," Phil said to the Baudelaires. "The guy we used to have, Foreman Firstein, was O.K. But last week he stopped showing up. It was very odd. The man who replaced him, Foreman Flacutono, is very mean. You'll stay on his good side if you know what's good for you."

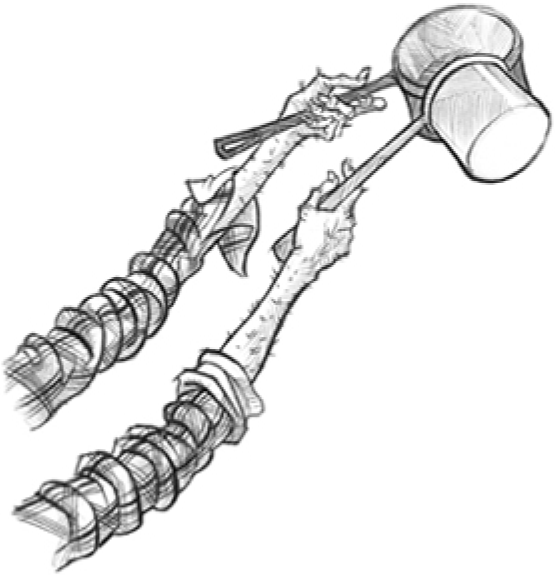
"He doesn't have a good side," a woman said.

"Now, now," Phil said. "Everything and everybody has a good side. Come on, let's have our supper."

The Baudelaire orphans smiled at Phil, and followed the other employees of the Lucky Smells Lumbermill into the kitchen, but they still had lumps in their throats as big as the lumps in the beef casserole that they ate for supper. The children could tell, from Phil's statement about everything and everybody having a good side, that he was an optimist. "Optimist" is a word which here refers to a person, such as Phil, who thinks hopeful and pleasant thoughts about nearly everything. For instance, if an optimist had his left arm chewed off by an alligator, he might say, in a pleasant and hopeful voice, "Well, this isn't too bad. I don't have my left arm anymore, but at least nobody will ever ask me whether I am right-handed or left-handed," but most of us would say something more along the lines of "Aaaaah! My arm! My arm!"

The Baudelaire orphans ate their damp casserole, and they tried to be optimists like Phil, but try as they might, none of their thoughts turned out pleasant or hopeful. They thought of the bunk bed they would share, in the smelly room with windows drawn on the walls. They thought of doing hard work in the lumbermill, getting sawdust all over them and being bossed around by Foreman Flacutono. They thought of the eye-shaped building outside the wooden gate. And most of all, they thought of their parents, their poor parents whom they missed so much and whom they would never see again. They thought all through supper, and they thought while changing into their pajamas, and they thought as Violet tossed and turned in the top bunk and Klaus and Sunny tossed and turned below her. They thought, as they did in the courtyard, that you never know, and that their new home could still be a wonderful one. But they could guess. And as the Lucky Smells employees snored around them, the children thought about all their unhappy circumstances, and began guessing. They tossed and turned, and guessed and guessed, and by the time they fell asleep there wasn't a single optimist in the Baudelaire bunk.

CHAPTER
Three



Morning is an important time of day, because how you spend your morning can often tell you what kind of day you are going to have. For instance, if you wake up to the sound of twittering birds, and find yourself in an enormous canopy bed, with a butler standing next to you holding a breakfast of freshly made muffins and hand-squeezed orange juice on a silver tray, you will know that your day will be a splendid one. If you wake up to the sound of church bells, and find yourself in a fairly big regular bed, with a butler standing next to you holding a breakfast of hot tea and toast on a plate, you will know that your day will be O.K. And if you wake up to the sound of somebody banging two metal pots together, and find yourself in a small bunk bed, with a nasty foreman standing in the doorway holding no breakfast at all, you will know that your day will be horrid.

You and I, of course, cannot be too surprised that the Baudelaire orphans' first day at the Lucky Smells Lumbermill was a horrid one. And the Baudelaires certainly did not expect twittering birds or a butler, not after their dismaying arrival. But never in their most uneasy dreams did they expect the cacophony—a word which here means "the sound of two metal pots being banged together by a nasty foreman standing in the doorway holding no breakfast at all"—that awoke them.

"Get up, you lazy, smelly things!" cried the foreman in an odd-sounding voice. He spoke as if he were covering his mouth with his hands. "Time for work, everybody! There's a new shipment of logs just waiting to be made into lumber!"

The children sat up and rubbed their eyes. All around them, the employees of the Lucky Smells Lumbermill were stretching and covering their ears at the sound of the pots. Phil, who was already up and making his bunk neatly, gave the Baudelaires a tired smile.

"Good morning, Baudelaires," Phil said. "And good morning, Foreman Flacutono. May I introduce you to your three newest employees? Foreman Flacutono, this is Violet, Klaus, and Sunny Baudelaire."

"I heard we'd have some new workers," the foreman said, dropping the pots to the floor with a clatter, "but nobody told me they'd be midgets."

"We're not midgets," Violet explained. "We're children."

"Children, midgets, what do I care?" Foreman Flacutono said in his muffled voice, walking over to the orphans' bunk. "All I care is that you get out of bed this instant and go straight to the mill."

The Baudelaires hopped out of the bunk bed, not wanting to anger a man who banged pots together instead of saying "Good morning." But once they got a good look at Foreman Flacutono they wanted to hop back into their bunks and pull the covers over their heads.

I'm sure you have heard it said that appearance does not matter so much, and that it is what's on the inside that counts. This is, of course, utter nonsense, because if it were true then people who were good on the inside would never have to comb their hair or take a bath, and the whole world would smell even worse than it already does. Appearance matters a great deal, because you can often tell a lot about people by looking at how they present themselves. And it was the way Foreman Flacutono presented himself that made the orphans want to jump back into their bunks. He was wearing stained overalls, which never make a good impression, and his shoes were taped shut instead of being tied up with laces. But it was the foreman's head that was the most unpleasant. Foreman Flacutono was bald, as bald as an egg, but rather than admit to being bald like sensible people do, he had purchased a curly white wig that made it look like he had a bunch of large dead worms all over his head. Some of the worm hairs stuck straight up, and some of them curled off to one side, and some of them ran down his ears and his forehead, and a few of them stretched straight out ahead as if they wanted to escape from Foreman Flacutono's scalp. Below his wig was a pair of dark and beady eyes, which blinked at the orphans in a most unpleasant way.

As for the rest of his face, it was impossible to tell what it looked like, because it was covered with a cloth mask, such as doctors wear when they are in hospitals. Foreman Flacutono's nose was all curled up under the mask, like an alligator hiding in the mud, and when he spoke the Baudelaires could see his mouth opening and closing behind the cloth. It is perfectly proper to wear these masks in hospitals, of course, to stop the spreading of germs, but it makes no sense if you are the foreman of the Lucky Smells Lumbermill. The only reason Foreman Flacutono could have for wearing a surgical mask would be to frighten people, and as he peered down at the Baudelaire orphans they were quite frightened indeed.

"The first thing you can do, Baudeliars," Foreman Flacutono said, "is pick up my pots. And never make me drop them again."

"But we didn't make you drop them," Klaus said.

"Bram!" Sunny added, which probably meant something like "and our last name is Baude*laire*."

"If you don't pick up the pots *this instant*," Foreman Flacutono said, "you will get no chewing gum for lunch."

The Baudelaire orphans did not care much for chewing gum, particularly peppermint chewing gum, which they were allergic to, but they ran to the pots. Violet picked one up and Sunny picked up the other, while Klaus hurriedly made the beds.

“Give them to me,” Foreman Flacutono snapped, and grabbed the pots out of the girls’ hands. “Now, workers, we’ve wasted enough time already. To the mills! Logs are waiting for us!”

“I hate log days,” one of the employees grumbled, but everyone followed Foreman Flacutono out of the dormitory and across the dirt-floored courtyard to the lumbermill, which was a dull gray building with many smokestacks sticking out of the top like a porcupine’s quills. The three children looked at one another worriedly. Except for one summer day, back when their parents were still alive, when the Baudelaires had opened a lemonade stand in front of their house, the orphans had never had jobs, and they were nervous.

The Baudelaires followed Foreman Flacutono into the lumbermill and saw that it was all one huge room, filled with enormous machines. Violet looked at a shiny steel machine with a pair of steel pinchers like the arms of a crab, and tried to figure out how this invention worked. Klaus examined a machine that looked like a big cage, with an enormous ball of string trapped inside, and tried to remember what he had read about lumbermills. Sunny stared at a rusty, creaky-looking machine that had a circular sawblade that looked quite jagged and fearsome and wondered if it was sharper than her own teeth. And all three Baudelaires gazed at a machine, covered in tiny smokestacks, that held a huge, flat stone up in the air, and wondered what in the world it was doing there.

The Baudelaires had only a few seconds to be curious about these machines, however, before Foreman Flacutono began clanging his two pots together and barking out orders. “The logs!” he shouted. “Turn on the pincher machine and get started with the logs!”

Phil ran to the pincher machine and pressed an orange button on it. With a rough whistling noise, the pinchers opened, and stretched toward the far wall of the lumbermill. The orphans had been so curious about the machines that they hadn’t noticed the huge pile of trees that were stacked, leaves and roots and all, along one wall of the lumbermill as if a giant had simply torn a small forest out of the ground and dropped it into the room. The pinchers picked up the tree on top of the stack and began lowering it to the ground, while Foreman Flacutono banged his pots together and shouted, “The debarkers! The debarkers!”

Another employee walked to the back corner of the room, where there were a stack of tiny green boxes and a pile of flat metal rectangles, as long and as thin as an adult eel. Without a word she picked up the pile of rectangles and began distributing them to the workers. “Take a debarker,” she whispered to the children. “One each.”

The children each took a rectangle and stood there, confused and hungry, just as the tree touched the ground. Foreman Flacutono clanged his pots together again, and the employees crowded around the tree and began scraping against it with their debarkers, filing the bark off each tree as you or I might file our nails. “You, too, midgets!” the foreman shouted, and the children found room among the adults to scrape away at the tree.

Phil had described the rigors of working in a lumbermill, and it had certainly sounded difficult. But as you remember, Phil was an optimist, so the actual work turned out to be much, much worse. For one thing, the debarkers were adult-sized, and it was difficult for the children to use them. Sunny could scarcely lift her debarker at all, and so used her teeth instead, but Violet and Klaus had teeth of only an average sharpness and so had to struggle with the debarkers. The three children scraped and scraped, but only tiny pieces of bark fell from the tree. For another thing, the children had not eaten any breakfast, and as the morning wore on they were so hungry that it was difficult to even lift the debarker, let alone scrape it against the tree. And for one more thing, once a tree was finally cleared of bark, the pinchers would drop another one onto the ground, and they would have to start all over again, which was extremely boring. But for the worst thing of all, the noise at the Lucky Smells Lumbermill was simply deafening. The debarkers made their displeasing scraping sound as they dragged across the trees. The pinchers made their rough whistling noise as they picked up logs. And Foreman Flacutono made his horrendous clanging noise as he banged his pots together. The orphans grew exhausted and frustrated. Their stomachs hurt and their ears rang. And they were unbelievably bored.

Finally, as the employees finished their fourteenth log, Foreman Flacutono banged his pots together and shouted, “Lunch break!” The workers stopped scraping, and the pinchers stopped whistling, and everyone sat down, exhausted, on the ground. Foreman Flacutono threw his pots on the floor, walked over to the tiny green boxes, and grabbed one. Opening it with a rip, he began to toss small pink squares at the workers, one to each. “You have five minutes for lunch!” he shouted, throwing three pink squares at the children. The Baudelaires could see that a damp patch had appeared on his surgical mask, from spit flying out of his mouth as he gave orders. “Just five minutes!”

Violet looked from the damp patch on the mask to the pink square in her hand, and for a second she didn’t believe what she was looking at. “It’s gum!” she said. “This is gum!”

Klaus looked from his sister’s square to his own. “Gum isn’t *lunch*!” he cried. “Gum isn’t even a *snack*!”

“Tanco!” Sunny shrieked, which meant something along the lines of “And babies shouldn’t even have gum, because they could choke on it!”

“You’d better eat your gum,” Phil said, moving over to sit next to the children. “It’s not very filling, but it’s the only thing they’ll let you eat until dinnertime.”

“Well, maybe we can get up a little earlier tomorrow,” Violet said, “and make some sandwiches.”

“We don’t have any sandwich-making ingredients,” Phil said. “We just get one meal, usually a casserole, every evening.”

“Well, maybe we can go into town and buy some ingredients,” Klaus said.

“I wish we could,” Phil said, “but we don’t have any money.”

“What about your wages?” Violet asked. “Surely you can spend some of the money you earn on sandwich ingredients.”

Phil gave the children a sad smile, and reached into his pocket. “At the Lucky Smells Lumbermill,” he said, bringing out a bunch of tiny scraps of paper, “they don’t pay us in money. They pay us in coupons. See, here’s what we all earned yesterday: twenty percent off a shampoo at Sam’s Haircutting Palace. The day before that we earned this coupon for a free refill of iced tea, and last week we earned this one: ‘Buy Two Banjos and Get One Free.’ The trouble is, we can’t buy two banjos, because we don’t have anything but these coupons.”

“Nelnu!” Sunny shrieked, but Foreman Flacutono began banging his pots together before anyone could realize what she meant.

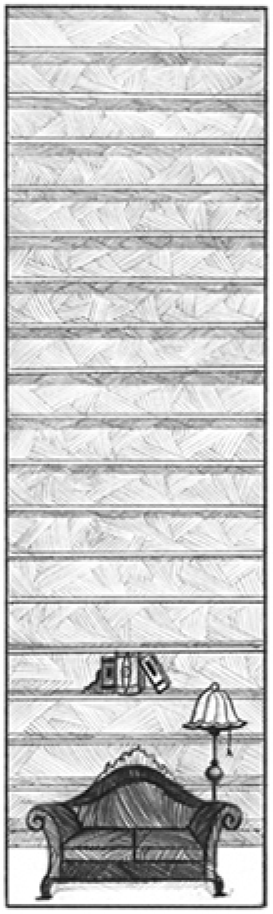
“Lunch is over!” he shouted. “Back to work, everyone! Everyone except you, Baudelamps! The boss wants to see you three in his office right away!”

The three siblings put down their debarkers and looked at one another. They had been working so hard that they had almost forgotten about meeting their guardian, whatever his name was. What sort of man would force small children to work in a lumbermill? What sort of man would hire a monster like Foreman Flacutono? What sort of man would pay his employees in coupons, or feed them only gum?

Foreman Flacutono banged his pots together again and pointed at the door, and the children stepped out of the noisy room into the quiet of the courtyard. Klaus took the map out of his pocket and pointed the way to the office. With each step, the orphans raised small clouds of dirt that matched the clouds of dread hovering over them. Their bodies ached from the morning’s work, and they had an uneasy feeling in their empty stomachs. As they had guessed from the way their day began, the three children were having a bad day. But as they got closer and closer to the office, they wondered if their day was about to get even worse.

CHAPTER
Four

As I'm sure you know, whenever there is a mirror around, it is almost impossible not to take a look at yourself. Even though we all know what we look like, we all like just to look at our reflections, if only to see how we're doing. As the Baudelaire orphans waited outside the office to meet their new guardian, they looked in a mirror hanging in the hallway and they saw at once that they were not doing so well. The children looked tired and they looked hungry. Violet's hair was covered in small pieces of bark. Klaus's glasses were hanging askew, a phrase which here means "tilted to one side from leaning over logs the entire morning." And there were small pieces of wood stuck in Sunny's four teeth from using them as debarkers. Behind them, reflected in the mirror, was a painting of the seashore, which was hanging on the opposite wall, which made them feel even worse, because the seashore always made them remember that terrible, terrible day when the three siblings went to the beach and soon received the news from Mr. Poe that their parents had died. The children stared at their own reflections, and stared at the painting of the seashore behind them, and it was almost unbearable to think about everything that had happened to them since that day.



“If someone had told me,” Violet said, “that day at the beach, that before long I’d find myself living at the Lucky Smells Lumbermill, I would have said they were crazy.”

“If someone had told *me*,” Klaus said, “that day at the beach, that before long I’d find myself pursued by a greedy, evil man named Count Olaf, I would have said they were insane.”

“Wora,” Sunny said, which meant something like “If someone had told *me*, that day at the beach, that before long I’d find myself using my four teeth to scrape the bark off trees, I would have said they were psychoneurotically disturbed.”

The dismayed orphans looked at their reflections, and their dismayed reflections looked back at them. For several moments, the Baudelaires stood and pondered the mysterious way their lives were going, and they were thinking so hard about it that they jumped a little when somebody spoke.

“You must be Violet, Klaus, and Sunny Baudelaire,” the somebody said, and the children turned to see a very tall man with very short hair. He was wearing a bright blue vest and holding a peach. He smiled and walked toward them, but then frowned as he drew closer. “Why, you’re covered in pieces of bark,” he said. “I hope you haven’t been hanging around the lumbermill. That can be very dangerous for small children.”

Violet looked at the peach, and wondered if she dared ask for a bite. “We’ve been working there all morning,” she said.

The man frowned. “*Working* there?”

Klaus looked at the peach, and had to stop himself from grabbing it right out of the man’s hand. “Yes,” he said. “We received your instructions and went right to work. Today was a new log day.”

The man scratched his head. “*Instructions*?” he asked. “What in the world are you talking about?”

Sunny looked at the peach, and it was all she could do not to leap up and sink her teeth right into it. “Molub!” she shrieked, which must have meant something like “We’re talking about the typed note that told us to go to work at the lumbermill!”

“Well, I don’t understand how three people as young as yourselves were put to work in the lumbermill, but please accept my humblest apologies, and let me tell you that it will not happen again. Why, you’re *children*, for goodness’ sake! You will be treated as members of the family!”

The orphans looked at one another. Could it be that their horrible experiences in Paltryville were just a mistake? “You mean we don’t have to debark any more logs?” Violet asked.

“Of course not,” the man said. “I can’t believe you were even allowed inside. Why, there are some nasty machines in there. I’m going to speak to your new guardian about it immediately."

"*You're* not our new guardian?" Klaus asked.

"Oh no," the man said. "Forgive me for not introducing myself. My name is Charles, and it's very nice to have the three of you here at Lucky Smells Lumbermill."

"It's very nice to be here," Violet lied politely.

"I find that difficult to believe," Charles said, "seeing as you've been forced to work in the mill, but let's put that behind us and have a fresh start. Would you care for a peach?"

"They've had their lunch!" came a booming voice, and the orphans whirled around and stared at the man they saw. He was quite short, shorter than Klaus, and dressed in a suit made of a very shiny dark-green material that made him look more like a reptile than a person. But what made them stare most was his face—or, rather, the cloud of smoke that was covering his face. The man was smoking a cigar, and the smoke from the cigar covered his entire head. The cloud of smoke made the Baudelaire children very curious as to what his face really looked like, and you may be curious as well, but you will have to take that curiosity to your grave, for I will tell you now, before we go any further, that the Baudelaires never saw this man's face, and neither did I, and neither will you.

"Oh, hello, sir," Charles said. "I was just meeting the Baudelaire children. Did you know they had arrived?"

"Of course I knew they arrived," the smoke-faced man said. "I'm not an idiot."

"No, of course not," Charles said. "But were you aware that they were put to work in the lumbermill? On a new log day, no less! I was just explaining to them what a terrible mistake that was."

"It wasn't a mistake," the man said. "I don't make mistakes, Charles. I'm not an idiot." He turned so the cloud of smoke faced the children.

“Hello, Baudelaire orphans. I thought we should lay eyes on one another.”

“Batex!” Sunny shrieked, which probably meant “But we’re not laying eyes on one another!”

“I have no time to talk about that,” the man said. “I see you’ve met Charles. He’s my partner. We split everything fifty-fifty, which is a good deal. Don’t you think so?”

“I guess so,” Klaus said. “I don’t know very much about the lumber business.”

“Oh, yes,” Charles said. “Of course I think it’s a good deal.”

“Well,” the man said, “I want to give you three a good deal as well. Now, I heard about what happened to your parents, which is really too bad. And I heard all about this Count Olaf fellow, who sounds like quite a jerk, and those odd-looking people who work for him. So when Mr. Poe gave me a call, I worked out a deal. The deal is this: I will try to make sure that Count Olaf and his associates never go anywhere near you, and you will work in my lumbermill until you come of age and get all that money. Is that a fair deal?”

The Baudelaire orphans did not answer this question, because it seemed to them the answer was obvious. A fair deal, as everyone knows, is when both people give something of more or less equal value. If you were bored with playing with your chemistry set, and you gave it to your brother in exchange for his dollhouse, that would be a fair deal. If someone offered to smuggle me out of the country in her sailboat, in exchange for free tickets to an ice show, that would be a fair deal. But working for years in a lumbermill in exchange for the owner’s *trying* to keep Count Olaf away is an enormously unfair deal, and the three youngsters knew it.

“Oh, sir,” Charles said, smiling nervously at the Baudelaires. “You can’t be serious. A lumbermill is no place for small children to work.”

“Of course it is,” the man said. He reached a hand up into his cloud to scratch an itch somewhere on his face. “It will teach them responsibility. It will teach them the value of work. And it will teach them how to make flat wooden boards out of trees.”

“Well, you probably know best,” Charles said, shrugging.

“But we could *read* about all of those things,” Klaus said, “and learn about them that way.”

“That’s true, sir,” Charles said. “They could study in the library. They seem very well behaved, and I’m sure they would cause no trouble.”

“Your library!” the man said sharply. “What nonsense! Don’t listen to Charles, you children. My partner has insisted that we create a library for the employees at the mill, and so I let him. But it is no substitute for hard work.”

“*Please*, sir,” Violet pleaded. “At least let our little sister stay in the dormitory. She’s only a baby.”

“I have offered you a very good deal,” the man said. “As long as you stay within the gates of the Lucky Smells Lumbermill, this Count Olaf will not come near you. In addition, I’m giving you a place to sleep, a nice hot dinner, and a stick of gum for lunch. And all you have to do in return is a few years’ work. That sounds like a pretty good deal to me. Well, it was nice to meet you. Unless you have any questions, I’ll be going now. My pizza is getting cold, and if there’s one thing I hate it’s a cold lunch.”

“I have a question,” Violet said, although the truth of the matter is she had many questions. Most of them began with the phrase “How can you.” “How can you force small children to work in a lumbermill?” was one of them. “How can you treat us so horridly, after all we’ve been through?” was another. And then there was “How can you pay your employees in coupons instead of money?” and “How can you feed us only gum for lunch?” and “How can you stand to have a cloud of smoke covering your face?” But none of these seemed like questions that were proper to ask, at least not out loud. So Violet looked her new guardian right in his cloud and asked, “What is your name?”

“Never mind what my name is,” the man said. “No one can pronounce it anyway. Just call me Sir.”

“I’ll show the children to the door, Sir,” Charles said quickly, and with a wave of his hand, the owner of the Lucky Smells Lumbermill was gone. Charles waited nervously for a moment, to make sure Sir was far enough away. Then he leaned in to the children and handed them the peach. “Never mind what he said about your already having your lunch,” he said. “Have this peach.”

“Oh, thank you,” Klaus cried, and hurriedly divided the peach among himself and his siblings, giving the biggest piece to Sunny because she hadn’t even had her gum. The Baudelaire children wolfed down the peach, and under normal circumstances it would not have been polite to eat something so quickly and so noisily, particularly in front of someone they did not know very well. But these circumstances were not at all normal, so even a manners expert would excuse them for their gobbling.

“You know,” Charles said, “because you seem like such nice children, and because you’ve worked so very hard today, I’m going to do something for you. Can you guess what it is?”

“Talk to Sir,” Violet said, wiping peach juice off her chin, “and convince him that we shouldn’t work in the lumbermill?”

“Well, no,” Charles admitted. “That wouldn’t do any good. He won’t listen to me.”

“But you’re his partner,” Klaus pointed out.

“That doesn’t matter,” Charles replied. “When Sir has made up his mind, he has made up his mind. I know he sometimes is a little bit mean, but you’ll have to excuse him. He had a very terrible childhood. Do you understand?”

Violet looked at the painting of the seashore, and thought once again of that dreadful day at the beach. “Yes,” she sighed. “I understand. I think I’m having a very terrible childhood myself.”

“Well, I know what will make you feel better,” Charles said, “at least a little bit. Let me show you the library before you go back to work. Then you can visit it whenever you want. Come on, it’s right down the hall.”

Charles led the Baudelaires down the hall-way, and even though they would soon be back at work, even though they had been offered one of the least fair deals ever offered to children, the three siblings felt a little bit better. Whether it was Uncle Monty’s library of reptile books, or Aunt Josephine’s library of grammar books, or Justice Strauss’s library of law books, or, best of all, their parents’ library of all kinds of books—all burned up now, alas—libraries always made them feel a little bit better. Just knowing that they could read made the Baudelaire orphans feel as if their wretched lives could be a little brighter. At the end of a hallway was a little door, and Charles stopped at the door, smiled at the children, and opened the door.

The library was a large room, and it was filled with elegant wooden bookshelves and comfortable-looking sofas on which to sit and read. On one wall was a row of windows, which let in more than enough light for reading, and on the other wall was a row of landscape paintings, perfect for resting one’s eyes. The Baudelaire children stepped inside the room and took a good look around. But they did not feel any better, not at all.

“Where are the books?” Klaus asked. “All these elegant bookshelves are empty.”

“That’s the only thing wrong with this library,” Charles admitted. “Sir wouldn’t give me any money to buy books.”

“You mean there are no books at all?” Violet asked.

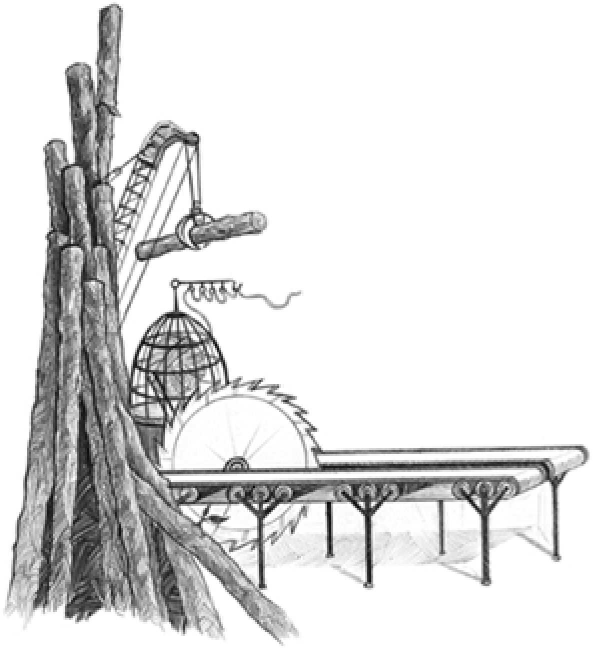
“Just three,” Charles said, and walked to the farthest bookshelf. There, on the bottom shelf, were three books sitting all by themselves. “Without money, of course, it was difficult to acquire any books, but I did have three books donated. Sir donated his book, *The History of Lucky Smells Lumbermill*. The mayor of Paltryville donated this book, *The Paltryville Constitution*. And here’s *Advanced Ocular Science*, donated by Dr. Orwell, a doctor who lives in town.”

Charles held up the three books to show the Baudelaires what each one looked like, and the children stared in dismay and fear. *The History of Lucky Smells Lumbermill* had a painting of Sir on the cover, with a cloud of smoke covering his face. *The Paltryville Constitution* had a photograph of the Paltryville post office, with the old shoe dangling from the flagpole in front. But it was the cover of *Advanced Ocular Science* that made the Baudelaire children stare.

You have heard, many times I'm sure, that you should not judge a book by its cover. But just as it is difficult to believe that a man who is not a doctor wearing a surgical mask and a white wig will turn out to be a charming person, it was difficult for the children to believe that *Advanced Ocular Science* was going to cause them anything but trouble. The word "ocular," you might not know, means "related to the eye," but even if you didn't know this you could figure it out from the cover. For printed on the cover was an image that the children recognized. They recognized it from their own nightmares, and from personal experience. It was an image of an eye, and the Baudelaire orphans recognized it as the mark of Count Olaf.

CHAPTER
Five

In the days that followed, the Baudelaire orphans had pits in their stomachs. In Sunny's case it was understandable, because when Klaus had divided up the peach, she had gotten the part with the pit. Normally, of course, one does not eat the pit part of the peach, but Sunny was very hungry, and liked to eat hard things, so the pit ended up in her stomach along with the parts of the fruit that you or I might find more suitable. But the pit in the Baudelaire stomachs was not so much from the snack that Charles had given them but from an overall feeling of doom. They were certain that Count Olaf was lurking nearby, like some predator waiting to pounce on the children while they weren't looking.



So each morning, when Foreman Flacutono clanged his pots together to wake everyone up, the Baudelaires took a good look at him to see if Count Olaf had taken his place. It would have been just like Count Olaf to put a white wig on his head and a surgical mask over his face, and snatch the Baudelaires right out of their bunk. But Foreman Flacutono always had the same dark and beady eyes, which didn't look a thing like Count Olaf's shiny ones, and he always spoke in his rough, muffled voice, which was the opposite of the smooth, snarly voice of Count Olaf. When the children walked across the dirt-floored courtyard to the lumbermill, they took a good look at their fellow employees. It would have been just like Count Olaf to get himself hired as an employee, and snatch the orphans away while Foreman Flacutono wasn't looking. But although all the workers looked tired, and sad, and hungry, none of them looked evil, or greedy, or had such awful manners.

And as the orphans performed the backbreaking labor of the lumbermill—the word "backbreaking" here means "so difficult and tiring that it felt like the orphans' backs were breaking, even though they actually weren't"—they wondered if Count Olaf would use one of the enormous machines to somehow get his hands on their fortune. But that didn't seem to be the case, either. After a few days of tearing the bark off the trees, the debarkers were put back in their corner, and the giant pincher machine was turned off. Next, the workers had to pick up the barkless trees themselves, one by one, and hold them against the buzzing circular saw until it had sliced each tree into flat boards. The youngsters' arms were soon achy and covered in splinters from lifting all of the logs, but Count Olaf did not take advantage of their weakened arms to kidnap them. After a few days of sawing, Foreman Flacutono ordered Phil to start up the machine with the enormous ball of string inside. The machine wrapped the string around small bundles of boards, and the employees had to gather around and tie the string into very complicated knots, to hold the bundles together. The siblings' fingers were soon so sore that they could scarcely hold the coupons they were given each day, but Count Olaf did not try to force them to surrender their fortune. Day after dreary day went by, and although the children were convinced that he must be somewhere nearby, Count Olaf simply did not show up. It was very puzzling.

"It is very puzzling," Violet said one day, during their gum break. "Count Olaf is simply nowhere to be found."

"I know," Klaus said, rubbing his right thumb, which was the sorest. "That building looks like his tattoo, and so does that book cover. But Count Olaf himself hasn't shown his face."

"Elund!" Sunny said thoughtfully. She probably meant something like "It is certainly perplexing."

Violet snapped her fingers, frowning because it hurt. "I've thought of something," she said. "Klaus, you just said he hasn't shown his face. Maybe he's Sir, in disguise. We can't tell what Sir really looks like because of that cloud of smoke. Count Olaf could have dressed in a green suit and taken up smoking just to fool us."

"I thought of that, too," Klaus said. "But he's much shorter than Count Olaf, and I don't know how you can disguise yourself as a much shorter person."

"Chorn!" Sunny pointed out, which meant something like "And his voice sounds nothing like Count Olaf's."

“That’s true,” Violet said, and gave Sunny a small piece of wood that was sitting on the floor. Because babies should not have gum, Sunny’s older siblings gave her these small tree scraps during the lunch break. Sunny did not eat the wood, of course, but she chewed on it and pretended it was a carrot, or an apple, or a beef and cheese enchilada, all of which she loved.

“It might just be that Count Olaf hasn’t found us,” Klaus said. “After all, Paltryville is in the middle of nowhere. It could take him years to track us down.”

“Pelli!” Sunny exclaimed, which meant something like “But that doesn’t explain the eye-shaped building, or the cover of the book!”

“Those things could just be coincidence,” Violet admitted. “We’re so scared of Count Olaf that maybe we’re just thinking we’re seeing him everywhere. Maybe he won’t show up. Maybe we really are safe here.”

“That’s the spirit,” said Phil, who had been sitting near them all this time. “Look on the bright side. Lucky Smells Lumbermill might not be your favorite place, but at least there’s no sign of this Olaf guy you keep talking about. This might turn out to be the most fortunate part of your lives.”

“I admire your optimism,” Klaus said, smiling at Phil.

“Me too,” Violet said.

“Tenpa,” Sunny agreed.

“That’s the spirit,” Phil said again, and stood up to stretch his legs. The Baudelaire orphans nodded, but looked at one another out of the corners of their eyes. It was true that Count Olaf hadn’t shown up, or at least he hadn’t shown up yet. But their situation was far from fortunate. They had to wake up to the clanging of pots, and be ordered around by Foreman Flacutono. They only had gum—or, in Sunny’s case, imaginary enchiladas—for lunch. And worst of all, working in the lumbermill was so exhausting that they didn’t have the energy to do anything else. Even though she was near complicated machines every day, Violet hadn’t even thought about inventing something for a very long time. Even though Klaus was free to visit Charles's library whenever he wanted to, he hadn't even glanced at any of the three books. And even though there were plenty of hard things around to bite, Sunny hadn't closed her mouth around more than a few of them. The children missed studying reptiles with Uncle Monty. They missed living over Lake Lachrymose with Aunt Josephine. And most of all, of course, they missed living with their parents, which was where, after all, they truly belonged.

"Well," Violet said, after a pause, "we'll only have to work here for a few years. Then I will be of age, and we can use some of the Baudelaire fortune. I'd like to build an inventing studio for myself, perhaps over Lake Lachrymose, where Aunt Josephine's house used to be, so we can always remember her."

"And I'd like to build a library," Klaus said, "that would be open to the public. And I've always hoped that we could buy back Uncle Monty's reptile collection, and take care of all the reptiles."

"Dolc!" Sunny shrieked, which meant "And I could be a dentist!"

"What in the world does 'Dolc' mean?"

The orphans looked up and saw that Charles had come into the lumbermill. He was smiling at them and taking something out of his pocket.

"Hello, Charles," Violet said. "It's nice to see you. What have you been up to?"

"Ironing Sir's shirts," Charles answered. "He has a lot of shirts, and he's too busy to iron them himself. I've been meaning to come by, but the ironing took a long time. I brought you some beef jerky. I was afraid to take more than a little bit, because Sir would know that it was missing, but here you go."

"Thank you very much," Klaus said politely. "We'll share this with the other employees."

“Well, O.K.,” Charles said, “but last week they got a coupon for thirty percent off beef jerky, so they probably bought plenty of it.”

“Maybe they did,” Violet said, knowing full well that there was no way any of the workers could afford beef jerky. “Charles, we’ve been meaning to ask you about one of the books in your library. You know the one with the eye on the cover? Where did you—”

Violet’s question was interrupted by the sound of Foreman Flacutono’s pots being banged together. “Back to work!” he shouted. “Back to work! We have to finish tying the bundles today, so there’s no time for chitchat!”

“I would just like to talk to these children for a few more minutes, Foreman Flacutono,” Charles said. “Surely we can extend the lunch break just a little bit.”

“Absolutely not!” Foreman Flacutono said, striding over to the orphans. “I have my orders from Sir, and I intend to carry them out. Unless you’d like to tell Sir that—”

“Oh, no,” Charles said quickly, backing away from Foreman Flacutono. “I don’t think that’s necessary.”

“Good,” the foreman said shortly. “Now get up, midgets! Lunch is over!”

The children sighed and stood up. They had long ago given up trying to convince Foreman Flacutono that they weren’t midgets. They waved good-bye to Charles, and walked slowly to the waiting bundle of boards, with Foreman Flacutono walking behind them, and at that moment one of the children had a trick played on him which I hope has never been played on you. This trick involves sticking your foot out in front of a person who is walking, so the person trips and falls on the ground. A policeman did it to me once, when I was carrying a crystal ball belonging to a Gypsy fortune-teller who never forgave me for tumbling to the ground and shattering her ball into hundreds of pieces. It is a mean trick, and it is easy to do, and I’m sorry to say that Foreman Flacutono did it to Klaus right at this moment.

Klaus fell right to the ground of the lumbermill, his glasses falling off his face and skittering over to the bundle of boards.

“Hey!” Klaus said. “You tripped me!”

One of the most annoying aspects of this sort of trick is that the person who does it usually pretends not to know what you’re talking about. “I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Foreman Flacutono said.

Klaus was too annoyed to argue. He stood up, and Violet walked over to fetch his glasses. But when she leaned over to pick them up, she saw at once that something was very, very wrong.

“Rotup!” Sunny shrieked, and she spoke the truth. When Klaus’s glasses had skittered across the room, they had scraped against the floor and hit the boards rather hard. Violet picked the glasses up, and they looked like a piece of modern sculpture a friend of mine made long ago. The sculpture was called *Twisted, Cracked, and Hopelessly Broken*.

“My brother’s glasses!” Violet cried. “They’re twisted, and cracked! They’re hopelessly broken, and he can scarcely see anything without them!”

“Too bad for you,” Foreman Flacutono said, shrugging at Klaus.

“Oh, don’t be ridiculous,” Charles said. “He needs a replacement pair, Foreman Flacutono. A child could see that.”

“Not me,” Klaus said. “I can scarcely see anything.”

“Well, take my arm,” Charles said. “There’s no way you can work in a lumbermill without being able to see what you’re doing. I’ll take you to the eye doctor right away.”

“Oh, thank you,” Violet said, relieved.

“Is there an eye doctor nearby?” Klaus asked.

“Oh yes,” Charles replied. “The closest one is Dr. Orwell, who wrote that book you were talking about. Dr. Orwell’s office is just outside the doors of the mill. I’m sure you noticed it on your way here—it’s made to look like a giant eye. Come on, Klaus.”

“Oh, no, Charles!” Violet said. “Don’t take him there!”

Charles cupped a hand to his ear. “What did you say?” he shouted. Phil had flipped a switch on the string machine, and the ball of string had begun to spin inside its cage, making a loud whirring sound as the employees got back to work.

“That building has the mark of Count Olaf!” Klaus shouted, but Foreman Flacutono had begun to clang his pots together, and Charles shook his head to indicate he couldn’t hear.

“Yoryar!” Sunny shrieked, but Charles just shrugged and led Klaus out of the mill.

The two Baudelaire sisters looked at one another. The whirring sound continued, and Foreman Flacutono kept on clanging his pots, but that wasn’t the loudest sound that the two girls heard. Louder than the machine, louder than the pots, was the sound of their own furiously beating hearts as Charles took their brother away.

CHAPTER
Six

"*I* tell you, you have nothing to worry about," Phil said, as Violet and Sunny picked at their casserole. It was dinnertime, but Klaus had still not returned from Dr. Orwell's, and the young Baudelaire women were worried sick. After work, while walking across the dirty courtyard with their fellow employees, Violet and Sunny had peered worriedly at the wooden gate that led out to Paltryville, and were dismayed to see no sign of Klaus. When they arrived at the dormitory, Violet and Sunny looked out the window to watch for him, and they were so anxious that it took them several minutes to realize that the window was not a real one, but one drawn on the blank wall with a ballpoint pen. Then they went out and sat on the doorstep, looking out at the empty courtyard, until Phil called them in to supper. And now it was getting on toward bedtime, and not only had their brother still not returned, but Phil was insisting that they had nothing to worry about.

"I think we do, Phil," Violet said. "I think we *do* have something to worry about. Klaus has been gone all afternoon, and Sunny and I are worried that something might have happened to him. Something awful."

"Becer!" Sunny agreed.

“I know that doctors can seem scary to young children,” Phil said, “but doctors are your friends, and they can’t hurt you.”

Violet looked at Phil and saw that their conversation would go nowhere. “You’re right,” she said tiredly, even though he was quite wrong. As anyone who’s ever been to a doctor knows, doctors are not necessarily your friends, any more than mail deliverers are your friends, or butchers are your friends, or refrigerator repair-people are your friends. A doctor is a man or woman whose job it is to make you feel better, that’s all, and if you’ve ever had a shot you know that the statement “Doctors can’t hurt you” is simply absurd. Violet and Sunny, of course, were worried that Dr. Orwell had some connection with Count Olaf, not that their brother would get a shot, but it was useless to try to explain such things to an optimist. So they merely picked at their casserole and waited for their brother until it was time for bed.

“Dr. Orwell must have fallen behind in his appointments,” Phil said, as Violet and Sunny tucked themselves into the bottom bunk. “His waiting room must be absolutely full.”

“Suski,” Sunny said sadly, which meant something along the lines of “I hope so, Phil.”

Phil smiled at the two Baudelaires and turned out the lights in the dormitory. The employees whispered to each other for a few minutes, and then were quiet, and before too long Violet and Sunny were surrounded by the sound of snores. The children did not sleep, of course, but stared out into the dark room with a growing feeling of dismay. Sunny made a squeaky, sad noise, like the closing of a door, and Violet took her sister’s fingers, which were sore from tying knots all day long, and blew on them gently. But even as the Baudelaire fingers felt better, the Baudelaire sisters did not. They lay together on the bunk and tried to imagine where Klaus could be and what was happening to him. But one of the worst things about Count Olaf is that his evil ways are so despicable that it is impossible to imagine what would be up his sleeve next. Count Olaf had done so many horrible deeds, all to get his hands on the Baudelaire fortune, that Violet and Sunny could scarcely bear to think what might be happening to their brother. The evening grew later and later, and the two siblings began to imagine more and more terrible things that could be happening to Klaus while they lay helpless in the dormitory.

“Stintamcunu,” Sunny whispered finally, and Violet nodded. They had to go and look for him.

The expression “quiet as mice” is a puzzling one, because mice can often be very noisy, so people who are being quiet as mice can often be very noisy, so people who are being quiet as mice may in fact be squeaking and scrambling around. The expression “quiet as mimes” is more appropriate, because mimes are people who perform theatrical routines without making a sound. Mimes are annoying and embarrassing, but they are much quieter than mice, so “quiet as mimes” is a more proper way to describe how Violet and Sunny got up from their bunk, tiptoed across the dormitory, and walked out into the night.

There was a full moon that night, and the children gazed for a moment at the quiet courtyard. The moonlight made the dirt floor look as strange and eerie as the surface of the moon. Violet picked Sunny up, and the two of them crossed the courtyard toward the heavy wooden gate leading out of the lumbermill. The only sound was the soft shuffling of Violet’s feet. The orphans could not remember when they had been in a place that felt so quiet and still, which is why the sudden creaking sound made them jump in surprise. The creaking sound was as noisy as mice, and seemed to be coming from straight ahead. Violet and Sunny stared out into the gloom, and with another creak the wooden gate swung open and revealed the short figure of a person, walking slowly toward them.

“Klaus!” Sunny said, for one of the few regular words she used was the name of her brother. And to her relief, Violet saw that it was indeed Klaus who was walking toward them. He had on a new pair of glasses that looked just like his old ones, except they were so new that they shone in the moonlight. He gave his sisters a dazed and distant smile, as if they were people he did not know so well.

“Klaus, we were so worried about you,” Violet said, hugging her brother as he reached them. “You were gone for so long. Whatever happened to you?”

“I don’t know,” Klaus said, so quietly that his sisters had to lean forward to hear him. “I can’t remember.”

“Did you see Count Olaf?” Violet asked. “Was Dr. Orwell working with him? Did they do anything to you?”

“I don’t know,” Klaus said, shaking his head. “I remember breaking my glasses, and I remember Charles taking me to the eye-shaped building. But I don’t remember anything else. I scarcely remember where I am right now.”

“*Klaus*,” Violet said firmly, “you are at the Lucky Smells Lumbermill in Paltryville. Surely you remember that.”

Klaus did not answer. He merely looked at his sisters with wide, wide eyes, as if they were an interesting aquarium or a parade.

“Klaus?” Violet asked. “I said, *you are at the Lucky Smells Lumbermill*.”

Klaus still did not answer.

“He must be very tired,” Violet said to Sunny.

“Libu,” Sunny said doubtfully.

“You’d better get to bed, Klaus,” Violet said. “Follow me.”

At last, Klaus spoke. “Yes, sir,” he said, quietly.

“*Sir*?” Violet repeated. “I’m not a sir—I’m your sister!”

But Klaus was silent once more, and Violet gave up. Still carrying Sunny, she walked back toward the dormitory, and Klaus shuffled behind her. The moon shone on his new glasses, and his steps made little clouds of dirt, but he didn’t say a word. Quiet as mimes, the Baudelaires walked back into the dormitory and tiptoed to their bunk bed. But when they reached it, Klaus merely stood nearby and stared at his two siblings, as if he had forgotten how to go to bed.

“Lie down, Klaus,” Violet said gently.

“Yes, sir,” Klaus replied, and lay down on the bottom bunk, still staring at his sisters. Violet sat on the edge of the bunk and removed Klaus’s shoes, which he had forgotten to take off, but it seemed that he did not even notice.

“We’ll discuss things in the morning,” Violet whispered. “In the meantime, Klaus, try to get some sleep.”

“Yes, sir,” Klaus said, and immediately shut his eyes. In a second he was fast asleep. Violet and Sunny watched the way his mouth quivered, just as it had always done when he was asleep, ever since he was a tiny baby. It was a relief to have Klaus back with them, of course, but the Baudelaire sisters did not feel relieved, not one bit. They had never seen their brother act so strangely. For the rest of the night, Violet and Sunny huddled together on the top bunk, peering down and watching Klaus sleep. No matter how much they looked at him, it still felt like their brother had not returned.

CHAPTER
Seven

If you have ever had a miserable experience, then you have probably had it said to you that you would feel better in the morning. This, of course, is utter nonsense, because a miserable experience remains a miserable experience even on the loveliest of mornings. For instance, if it were your birthday, and a wart-removal cream was the only present you received, someone might tell you to get a good night's sleep and wait until morning, but in the morning the tube of wart-removal cream would still be sitting there next to your uneaten birthday cake, and you would feel as miserable as ever. My chauffeur once told me that I would feel better in the morning, but when I woke up the two of us were still on a tiny island surrounded by man-eating crocodiles, and, as I'm sure you can understand, I didn't feel any better about it.

And so it was with the Baudelaire orphans. As soon as Foreman Flacutono began clanging his pots together, Klaus opened his eyes and asked where in the world he was, and Violet and Sunny did not feel better at all.

“What is wrong with you, Klaus?” Violet asked.

Klaus looked at Violet carefully, as if they had met once, years ago, and he had forgotten her name. “I don’t know,” he said. “I’m having trouble remembering things. What happened yesterday?”

“That’s what we want to ask you, Klaus,” Violet said, but she was interrupted by their rude employer.

“Get up, you lazy midgets!” Foreman Flacutono shouted, walking over to the Baudelaire bunk and clanging his pots together again. “The Lucky Smells Lumbermill has no time for dawdling! Get out of bed this instant and go straight to work!”

Klaus’s eyes grew very wide, and he sat up in bed. In an instant he was walking toward the door of the dormitory, without a word to his sisters.

“That’s the spirit!” Foreman Flacutono said, and clanged his pots together again. “Now everybody! On to the lumbermill!”

Violet and Sunny looked at one another and hurried to follow their brother and the other employees, but Violet took one step, and something made her stop. On the floor next to the Baudelaire bunk were Klaus’s shoes, which she had removed the night before. Klaus had not even put them on before walking outside.

“His shoes!” Violet said, picking them up. “Klaus, you forgot your shoes!” She ran after him, but Klaus did not even look back. By the time Violet reached the door, her brother was walking barefoot across the courtyard.

“Grummle?” Sunny called after him, but he did not answer.

“Come on, children,” Phil said. “Let’s hurry to the lumbermill.”

“Phil, there’s something wrong with my brother,” Violet said, watching Klaus open the door of the lumbermill and lead the other employees inside. “He scarcely says a word to us, he doesn’t seem to remember anything, and look! He didn’t put on his shoes this morning!”

“Well, look on the bright side,” Phil said. “We’re supposed to finish tying today, and next we do the stamping. Stamping is the easiest part of the lumber business.”

“I don’t *care* about the lumber business!” Violet cried. “Something is wrong with Klaus!”

“Let’s not make trouble, Violet,” Phil said, and walked off toward the lumbermill. Violet and Sunny looked at one another helplessly. They had no choice but to follow Phil across the courtyard and into the mill. Inside, the string machine was already whirring, and the employees were beginning to tie up the last few batches of boards. Violet and Sunny hurried to get a place next to Klaus, and for the next few hours they tied knots and tried to talk to their brother. But it was difficult to speak to him over the whirring of the string machine and the clanging of Foreman Flacutono’s pots, and Klaus never answered them. Finally, the last pile of boards was tied together, and Phil turned off the string machine, and everybody received their gum. Violet and Sunny each grabbed one of Klaus’s arms and dragged their barefooted brother to a corner of the mill to talk to him.

“Klaus, Klaus, *please* talk to me,” Violet cried. “You’re frightening us. You’ve got to tell us what Dr. Orwell did, so we can help you.”

Klaus simply stared at his sister with widened eyes.

“Eshan!” Sunny shrieked.

Klaus did not say a word. He did not even put his gum into his mouth. Violet and Sunny sat down beside him, confused and frightened, and put their arms around their brother as though they were afraid he was floating away. They sat there like that, a heap of Baudelaires, until Foreman Flacutono clanged his pots together to signal the end of the break.

“Stamping time!” Foreman Flacutono said, pushing his stringy white wig out of his eyes. “Everybody line up for stamping. And *you*,” he said, pointing to Klaus. “*You*, you lucky midget, will be operating the machine. Come over here so I can give you instructions.”

“Yes, sir,” Klaus said, in a quiet voice, and his sisters gasped in surprise. It was the first time he had spoken since they were in the dormitory. Without another word he stood up, disentangled himself from his siblings, and walked toward Foreman Flacutono while his sisters looked on amazedly.

Violet turned to her baby sister and brushed a small scrap of string out of her hair, something her mother used to do all the time. The eldest Baudelaire remembered, as she had remembered so many times, the promise she had made to her parents when Sunny was born. “You are the eldest Baudelaire child,” her parents had said. “And as the eldest, it will always be your responsibility to look after your younger siblings. Promise us that you will always watch out for them and make sure they don’t get into trouble.” Violet knew, of course, that her parents had never guessed, when they told her this, that the sort of trouble her siblings would get into would be so ostentatiously—a word which here means “really, really”—horrendous, but still she felt as if she had let her parents down. Klaus was clearly in trouble, and Violet could not shake the feeling that it was her responsibility to get him out of it.

Foreman Flacutono whispered something to Klaus, who walked slowly over to the machine covered in smokestacks and began to operate its controls. Foreman Flacutono nodded to Klaus and clanged his pots together again. “Let the stamping begin!” he said, in his terrible muffled voice. The Baudelaires had no idea what Foreman Flacutono meant by stamping, and thought maybe it involved jumping up and down on the boards for some reason, like stamping on ants. But it turned out to be more like stamping a library book. The workers would lift a bundle of boards and place it on a special mat, and the machine would bring its huge, flat stone down on top of the boards with a thunderous *stamp*!, leaving a label in red ink that said “Lucky Smells Lumbermill.” Then everyone had to blow on the stamp so it dried quickly. Violet and Sunny couldn’t help wondering if people who would make their houses out of these boards would mind having the name of the lumbermill written on the walls of their homes. But, more important, they couldn't help wondering how Klaus knew how to work the stamping machine, and why Foreman Flacutono was having their brother at the controls, instead of Phil or one of the other employees.

"You see?" Phil told the Baudelaire sisters, from across a bundle of boards. "There's nothing wrong with Klaus. He's working the machine perfectly. You spent all that time worrying for nothing."

Stamp!

"Maybe," Violet said doubtfully, blowing on the M in "Lumbermill."

"And I told you that stamping was the easiest part of the lumbermill industry," Phil said. *Stamp*! "Your lips get a little sore from all the blowing, but that's all."

"Wiro," Sunny said, which meant something like "That's true, but I'm still worried about Klaus."

"That's the spirit," said Phil, misunderstanding her. "I told you that if you just looked on the bright side—"

Stam—crash—aah!

Phil fell to the floor in midsentence, his face pale and sweaty. Of all the terrible noises to be heard at the Lucky Smells Lumbermill, this one was the most terrible by far. The thunderous *stamp*!ing sound had been cut off by a wrenching crash and a piercing shriek. The stamping machine had gone horribly wrong, and the huge flat stone had not been brought down where it was supposed to be brought down, on the bundle of boards. Most of the stone had been brought down on the string machine, which was now hopelessly smashed. But part of it had been brought down on Phil's leg.

Foreman Flacutono dropped his pots and ran over to the controls of the stamping machine, pushing the dazed Klaus aside. With a flip of the switch he brought the stone up again, and everyone gathered around to see the damage. The cage part of the string machine was split open like an egg, and the string had become completely entwined and entangled. And I simply cannot describe the grotesque and unnerving sight—the words “grotesque” and “unnerving” here mean “twisted, tangled, stained, and gory”—of poor Phil’s leg. It made Violet’s and Sunny’s stomachs turn to gaze upon it, but Phil looked up and gave them a weak smile.

“Well,” he said, “this isn’t too bad. My left leg is broken, but at least I’m right-legged. That’s pretty fortunate.”

“Gee,” one of the other employees murmured. “I thought he’d say something more along the lines of ‘Aaaaah! My leg! My leg!’”

“If someone could just help me get to my foot,” Phil said, “I’m sure that I can get back to work.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Violet said. “You need to go to a hospital.”

“Yes, Phil,” another worker said. “We have those coupons from last month, fifty percent off a cast at the Ahab Memorial Hospital. Two of us will chip in and get your leg all fixed up. I’ll call for an ambulance right away.”

Phil smiled. “That’s very kind of you,” he said.

“This is a disaster!” Foreman Flacutono shouted. “This is the worst accident in the history of the lumbermill!”

“No, no,” Phil said. “It’s fine. I’ve never liked my left leg so much, anyway.”

“Not your leg, you overgrown midget,” Foreman Flacutono said impatiently. “The string machine! Those cost an inordinate amount of money!”

“What does ‘inordinate’ mean?” somebody asked.

“It means many things,” Klaus said suddenly, blinking. “It can mean ‘irregular.’ It can mean ‘immoderate.’ It can mean ‘disorderly.’ But in the case of money, it is more likely to mean ‘excessive.’ Foreman Flacutono means that the string machine costs a lot of money.”

The two Baudelaire sisters looked at one another and almost laughed in relief. “Klaus!” Violet cried. “You’re defining things!”

Klaus looked at his sisters and gave them a sleepy smile. “I guess I am,” he said.

“Nojeemoo!” Sunny shrieked, which meant something along the lines of “You appear to be back to normal,” and she was right. Klaus blinked again, and then looked at the mess he had caused.

“What happened here?” he asked, frowning. “Phil, what happened to your leg?”

“It’s perfectly all right,” Phil said, wincing in pain as he tried to move. “It’s just a little sore.”

“You mean you don’t remember what happened?” Violet asked.

“What happened *when*?” Klaus asked, frowning. “Why, look! I’m not wearing any shoes!”

“Well, *I* certainly remember what happened!” Foreman Flacutono shouted, pointing at Klaus. “You smashed our machine! I will tell Sir about this right away! You’ve put a complete halt to the stamping process! Nobody will earn a single coupon today!”

“That’s not fair!” Violet said. “It was an *accident*! And Klaus never should have been put in charge of that machine! He didn’t know how to use it!”

“Well, he’d better learn,” Foreman Flacutono said. “Now pick up my pots, Klaus!”

Klaus went over to pick up the pots, but halfway there Foreman Flacutono stuck his foot out, playing the same trick he had played the previous day, and I’m sorry to tell you that it worked just as well. Again, Klaus fell right to the ground of the lumbermill, and again, his glasses fell off his face and skittered over to the bundle of boards, and worst of all, once again they became all twisted and cracked and hopelessly broken, like my friend Tatiana's sculptures.

"My glasses!" Klaus cried. "My glasses are broken again!"

Violet got a funny feeling in her stomach, all quivery and slithery as if she had eaten snakes, rather than gum, during the lunch break. "Are you sure?" she asked Klaus. "Are you sure you can't wear them?"

"I'm sure," Klaus said miserably, holding them up for Violet to see.

"Well, well, well," Foreman Flacutono said. "How careless of you. I guess you're due for another appointment with Dr. Orwell."

"We don't want to bother him," Violet said quickly. "If you give me some basic supplies, I'm sure I can build some glasses myself."

"No, no," the foreman said, his surgical mask curling into a frown. "You'd better leave optometry to the experts. Say good-bye to your brother."

"Oh, no," Violet said, desperately. She thought again of the promise she made to her parents. "We'll take him! Sunny and I will bring him to Dr. Orwell."

"Derix!" Sunny shrieked, which clearly meant something along the lines of "If we can't prevent him from going to Dr. Orwell, at least we can go with him!"

"Well, all right," said Foreman Flacutono, and his beady little eyes grew even darker than usual. "That's a good idea, come to think of it. Why don't all three of you go see Dr. Orwell?"

CHAPTER
Eight

DR. GEORGINA ORWELL

The Baudelaire orphans stood outside the gates of the Lucky Smells Lumbermill and looked at an ambulance rushing past them as it took Phil to the hospital. They looked at the chewed-up gum letters of the lumbermill sign. And they looked down at the cracked pavement of Paltryville's street. In short, they looked everywhere but at the eye-shaped building.

"We don't have to go," Violet said. "We could run away. We could hide until the next train arrived, and take it as far as possible. We know how to work in a lumbermill now, so we could get jobs in some other town."

"But what if he found us?" Klaus said, squinting at his sister. "Who would protect us from Count Olaf, if we were all by ourselves?"

"We could protect ourselves," Violet replied.

"How can we protect ourselves," Klaus asked, "when one of us is a baby and another one can barely see?"

"We've protected ourselves before," Violet said.

"Just barely," Klaus replied. "We've just barely escaped from Count Olaf each time. We can't run away and try to get along by ourselves, without glasses. We have to go see Dr. Orwell and hope for the best."

Sunny gave a little shriek of fear. Violet, of course, was too old to shriek except in emergency situations, but she was not too old to be frightened. “We don’t know what will happen to us inside there,” she said, looking at the black door in the eye’s pupil. “*Think*, Klaus. Try to *think*. What happened to you when you went inside?”

“I don’t know,” Klaus said miserably. “I remember trying to tell Charles not to take me to the eye doctor, but he kept telling me that doctors were my friends, and not to be frightened.”

“Ha!” Sunny shrieked, which meant “Ha!”

“And then what do you remember?” Violet asked.

Klaus closed his eyes in thought. “I wish I could tell you. But it’s like that part of my brain has been wiped clean. It’s like I was asleep from the moment I walked into that building until right there at the lumbermill.”

“But you weren’t asleep,” Violet said. “You were walking around like a zombie. And then you caused that accident and hurt poor Phil.”

“But I don’t remember those things,” Klaus said. “It’s as if I…” His voice trailed off and he stared into space for a moment.

“Klaus?” Violet asked worriedly.

“…It’s as if I were hypnotized,” Klaus finished. He looked at Violet and then at Sunny, and his sisters could see that he was figuring something out. “Of course. Hypnosis would explain everything.”

“I thought hypnosis was only in scary movies,” Violet said.

“Oh, no,” Klaus answered. “I read the *Encyclopedia Hypnotica* just last year. It described all these famous cases of hypnosis throughout history. There was an ancient Egyptian king who was hypnotized. All the hypnotist had to do was shout ‘Ramses!’ and the king would perform chicken imitations, even though he was in front of the royal court.”

“That’s very interesting,” Violet said, “but—”

“A Chinese merchant who lived during the Ling Dynasty was hypnotized. All the hypnotist had to do was shout ‘Mao!’ and the merchant would play the violin, even though he had never seen one before.”

“These are amazing stories,” Violet said, “but—”

“A man who lived in England in the nineteen twenties was hypnotized. All the hypnotist had to do was shout ‘Bloomsbury!’ and he suddenly became a brilliant writer, even though he couldn’t read.”

“Mazée!” Sunny shrieked, which probably meant “We don’t have time to hear all these stories, Klaus!”

Klaus grinned. “I’m sorry,” he said, “but it was a very interesting book, and I’m so pleased that it’s coming in handy.”

“Well, what did the book say about how to stop yourself from being hypnotized?” Violet asked.

Klaus’s grin faded. “Nothing,” he said.

“Nothing?” Violet repeated. “An entire encyclopedia about hypnosis said nothing about it at all?”

“If it did, I didn’t read any of it. I thought the parts about the famous hypnosis cases were the most interesting, so I read those, but I skipped some of the boring parts.”

For the first time since they had walked out of the gates of the lumbermill, the Baudelaire orphans looked at the eye-shaped building, and the building looked back at them. To Klaus, of course, Dr. Orwell’s office just looked like a big blur, but to his sisters it looked like trouble. The round door, painted black to resemble the pupil of the eye, looked like a deep and endless hole, and the children felt as if they were going to fall into it.

“I’m never skipping the boring parts of a book again,” Klaus said, and walked cautiously toward the building.

“You’re not going inside?” Violet said incredulously, a word which here means “in a tone of voice to indicate Klaus was being foolish.”

“What else can we do?” Klaus said quietly. He began to feel along the side of the building to find the door, and at this point in the story of the Baudelaire orphans, I would like to interrupt for a moment and answer a question I’m sure you are asking yourself. It is an important question, one which many, many people have asked many, many times, in many, many places all over the world. The Baudelaire orphans have asked it, of course. Mr. Poe has asked it. I have asked it. My beloved Beatrice, before her untimely death, asked it, although she asked it too late. The question is: *Where is Count Olaf*?

If you have been following the story of these three orphans since the very beginning, then you know that Count Olaf is always lurking around these poor children, plotting and scheming to get his hands on the Baudelaire fortune. Within days of the orphans’ arrival at a new place, Count Olaf and his nefarious assistants—the word “nefarious” here means “Baudelaire-hating”—are usually on the scene, sneaking around and committing dastardly deeds. And yet so far he has been nowhere to be found. So, as the three youngsters reluctantly head toward Dr. Orwell’s office, I know you must be asking yourself where in the world this despicable villain can be. The answer is: *Very nearby*.

Violet and Sunny walked to the eye-shaped building and helped their brother up the steps to the door, but before they could open it, the pupil swung open to reveal a person in a long white coat with a name tag reading “Dr. Orwell.” Dr. Orwell was a tall woman with blond hair pulled back from her head and fashioned into a tight, tight bun. She had big black boots on her feet, and was holding a long black cane with a shiny red jewel on the top.

“Why hello, Klaus,” Dr. Orwell said, nodding formally at the Baudelaires. “I didn’t expect to see you back so soon. Don’t tell me you broke your glasses again.”

“Unfortunately, yes,” Klaus said.

“That’s too bad,” Dr. Orwell said. “But you’re in luck. We have very few appointments today, so come on in and I’ll do all the necessary tests.”

The Baudelaire orphans looked at one another nervously. This wasn’t what they had expected at all. They expected Dr. Orwell to be a much more sinister figure—Count Olaf in disguise, for instance, or one of his terrifying associates. They expected that they would be snatched inside the eye-shaped building, and perhaps never return. Instead Dr. Orwell was a professional-looking woman who was politely inviting them inside.

“Come on,” she said, showing the way with her black cane. “Shirley, my receptionist, made some cookies that you girls can eat in the waiting room while I make Klaus’s glasses. It won’t take nearly as long as it did yesterday.”

“Will Klaus be hypnotized?” Violet demanded.

“Hypnotized?” Dr. Orwell repeated, smiling. “Goodness, no. Hypnosis is only in scary movies.”

The children, of course, knew this was not true, but they figured if Dr. Orwell thought it was true then she probably wasn’t a hypnotist. Cautiously, they stepped inside the eye-shaped building and followed Dr. Orwell down a hallway decorated with medical certificates.

“This way to the office,” she said. “Klaus tells me he’s quite a reader. Do you two read as well?”

“Oh yes,” Violet said. She was beginning to relax. “We read whenever we can.”

“Have you ever encountered,” Dr. Orwell said, “in your reading, the expression ‘You catch more flies with honey than with vinegar’?”

“Tuzmo,” Sunny replied, which meant something along the lines of “I don’t believe so.”

“I haven’t read too many books about flies,” Violet admitted.

“Well, the expression doesn’t really have to do with flies,” Dr. Orwell explained. “It’s just a fancy way of saying that you’re more likely to get what you want by acting in a sweet way, like honey, rather than in a distasteful way, like vinegar.”

“That’s interesting,” Klaus said, wondering why Dr. Orwell was bringing it up.

“I suppose you’re wondering why I’m bringing it up,” Dr. Orwell said, pausing in front of a door marked “Waiting Room.” “But I think all will be clear to you in just a moment. Now, Klaus, follow me to the office, and you girls can wait in the waiting room through this door.”

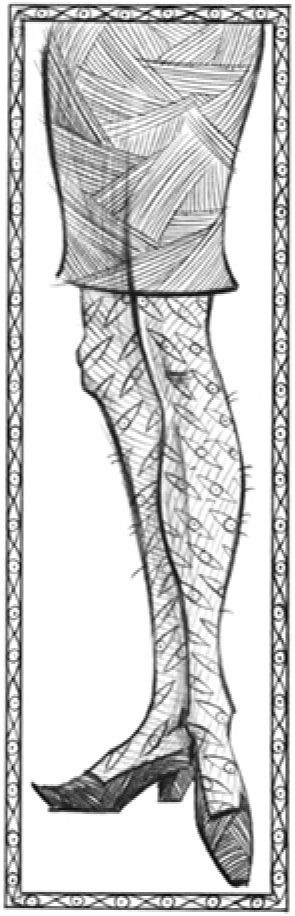
The children hesitated.

“It will just be a few moments,” Dr. Orwell said, and patted Sunny on the head.

“Well, all right,” Violet said, and gave her brother a wave as he followed the optometrist farther down the hallway. Violet and Sunny gave the door a push and went inside the waiting room, and saw in an instant that Dr. Orwell was right. All was clear to them in a moment. The waiting room was a small one, and it looked like most waiting rooms. It had a sofa and a few chairs and a small table with old magazines stacked on it, and a receptionist sitting at a desk, just like waiting rooms that you or I have been in. But when Violet and Sunny looked at the receptionist, they saw something that I hope you have never seen in a waiting room. A nameplate on the desk read “Shirley,” but this was no Shirley, even though the receptionist was wearing a pale-brown dress and sensible beige shoes. For above the pale lipstick on Shirley’s face, and below the blond wig on Shirley’s head, was a pair of shiny, shiny eyes that the two children recognized at once. Dr. Orwell, in behaving politely, had been the honey, instead of the vinegar. The children, unfortunately, were the flies. And Count Olaf, sitting at the receptionist’s desk with an evil smile, had caught them at last.

CHAPTER
Nine

Oftentimes, when children are in trouble, you will hear people say that it is all because of low self-esteem. “Low self-esteem” is a phrase which here describes children who do not think much of themselves. They might think that they are ugly, or boring, or unable to do anything correctly, or some combination of these things, and whether or not they are right, you can see why those sorts of feelings might lead one into trouble. In the vast majority of cases, however, getting into trouble has nothing to do with one’s self-esteem. It usually has much more to do with whatever is causing the trouble—a monster, a bus driver, a banana peel, killer bees, the school principal—than what you think of yourself.



And so it was as Violet and Sunny Baudelaire stared at Count Olaf—or, as the nameplate on his desk said, Shirley. Violet and Sunny had a very healthy amount of self-esteem. Violet knew she could do things correctly, because she had invented many devices that worked perfectly. Sunny knew she wasn't boring, because her siblings always took an interest in what she had to say. And both Baudelaire sisters knew that they weren't ugly, because they could see their pleasant facial features reflected back at them, in the middle of Count Olaf's shiny, shiny eyes. But it did not matter that they thought these things, because they were trapped.

"Why, hello there, little girls," Count Olaf said in a ridiculously high voice, as if he were really a receptionist named Shirley instead of an evil man after the Baudelaire fortune. "What are your names?"

"You *know* our names," Violet said curtly, a word which here means "tired of Count Olaf's nonsense." "That wig and that lipstick don't fool us any more than your pale-brown dress and sensible beige shoes. You're Count Olaf."

"I'm afraid you're mistaken," Count Olaf said. "I'm Shirley. See this nameplate?"

"Fiti!" Sunny shrieked, which meant "That nameplate doesn't prove anything, of course!"

"Sunny's right," Violet said. "You're not Shirley just because you have a small piece of wood with your name on it."

"I'll tell you why I'm Shirley," Count Olaf said. "I'm Shirley because I would like to be called Shirley, and it is impolite not to do so."

"I don't care if we're impolite," Violet said, "to such a disgusting person as yourself."

Count Olaf shook his head. "But if you do something impolite to *me*," he said, "then *I* might do something impolite to *you*, like for instance tearing your hair out with my bare hands."

Violet and Sunny looked at Count Olaf's hands. They noticed for the first time that he had grown his fingernails very long, and painted them bright pink as part of his disguise. The Baudelaire sisters looked at one another. Count Olaf's nails looked very sharp indeed.

"O.K., *Shirley*," Violet said. "You've been lurking around Paltryville since we arrived, haven't you?"

Shirley lifted a hand to pat her wig into place. "Maybe," she said, still in her foolish high voice.

"And you've been hiding out in the eye-shaped building this whole time, haven't you?" Violet said.

Shirley batted her eyes, and Violet and Sunny noticed that beneath her one long eyebrow—another identifying mark of Count Olaf—she was wearing long false eyelashes. "Perhaps," she said.

“And you’re in cahoots with Dr. Orwell!” Violet said, using a phrase which here means “working with, in order to capture the Baudelaire fortune.” “Aren’t you?”

“Possibly,” Shirley said, crossing her legs and revealing long white stockings imprinted with the pattern of an eye.

“Popinsh!” Sunny shrieked.

“Sunny means,” Violet said, “that Dr. Orwell hypnotized Klaus and caused that terrible accident, didn’t she?”

“Conceivably,” Shirley said.

“And he’s being hypnotized again, right now, isn’t he?” Violet asked.

“It’s within the bounds of the imagination,” Shirley said.

Violet and Sunny looked at one another, their hearts pounding. Violet took her sister’s hand and took a step backward, toward the door. “And now,” she said, “you’re going to try to whisk us away, aren’t you?”

“Of course not,” Shirley said. “I’m going to offer you a cookie, like a good little receptionist.”

“You’re not a receptionist!” Violet cried.

“I certainly am,” Shirley said. “I’m a poor receptionist who lives all by herself, and who wants very much to raise children of her own. Three children, in fact: a smartypants little girl, a hypnotized little boy, and a buck-toothed baby.”

“Well, you can’t raise us,” Violet said. “We’re already being raised by Sir.”

“Oh, he’ll hand you over to me soon enough,” Shirley said, her eyes shining brightly.

“Don’t be ab—” Violet said, but she stopped herself before she could say “surd.” She wanted to say “surd.” She wanted to say “Sir wouldn’t do a thing like that,” but inside she wasn’t so sure. Sir had already made the three Baudelaires sleep in one small bunk bed. He had already made them work in a lumbermill. And he had already only fed them gum for lunch. And as much as she wanted to believe that it was absurd to think that he would simply hand the Baudelaire orphans over to Shirley, Violet was not certain. She was only half sure, and so she stopped herself after half a word.

“Ab?” said a voice behind her. “What in the world does the word ‘ab’ mean?”

Violet and Sunny turned around and saw Dr. Orwell leading Klaus into the waiting room. He was wearing another new pair of glasses and was looking confused.

“Klaus!” Violet cried. “We were so worried ab—” She stopped herself before she could say “out” when she saw her brother’s expression. It was the same expression he’d had the previous night, when he finally came back from his first appointment with Dr. Orwell. Behind his newest pair of glasses, Klaus had wide, wide eyes, and a dazed and distant smile, as if his sisters were people he did not know so well.

“There you go again, with ‘ab,’” Dr. Orwell said. “Whatever in the world does it mean?”

“‘Ab’ isn’t a word, of course,” Shirley said. “Only a stupid person would say a word like ‘ab.’”

“They are stupid, aren’t they?” Dr. Orwell agreed, as though they were talking about the weather instead of insulting young children. “They must have very low self-esteem.”

“I couldn’t agree more, Dr. Orwell,” Shirley said.

“Call me Georgina,” the horrible optometrist replied, winking. “Now, girls, here is your brother. He’s a little tired after his appointment, but he’ll be fine by tomorrow morning. More than fine, in fact. *Much* more.” She turned and pointed at the door with her jeweled cane. “I believe you three know the way out.”

“I don’t,” Klaus said faintly. “I can’t remember coming in here.”

“That often happens after optometry appointments,” Dr. Orwell said smoothly. “Now run along, orphans.”

Violet took her brother by the hand and began to lead him out of the waiting room. “We’re really free to go?” she asked, not believing it for a moment.

“Of course,” Dr. Orwell said. “But I’m sure my receptionist and I will see you soon. After all, Klaus seems to have gotten very clumsy lately. He’s always causing accidents.”

“Roopish!” Sunny shrieked. She probably meant “They’re not accidents! They’re the results of hypnotism!” but the adults paid no attention. Dr. Orwell merely stepped out of the doorway and Shirley wiggled her pink fingers at them in a scrawny wave.

“Toodle-oo, orphans!” Shirley said. Klaus looked at Shirley and waved back as Violet and Sunny led him by the hand out of the waiting room.

“How could you wave to her?” Violet hissed to her brother, as they walked back down the hallway.

“She seems like a nice lady,” Klaus said, frowning. “I know I’ve met her somewhere before.”

“Ballywot!” Sunny shrieked, which undoubtedly meant “She’s Count Olaf in disguise!”

“If you say so,” Klaus said vaguely.

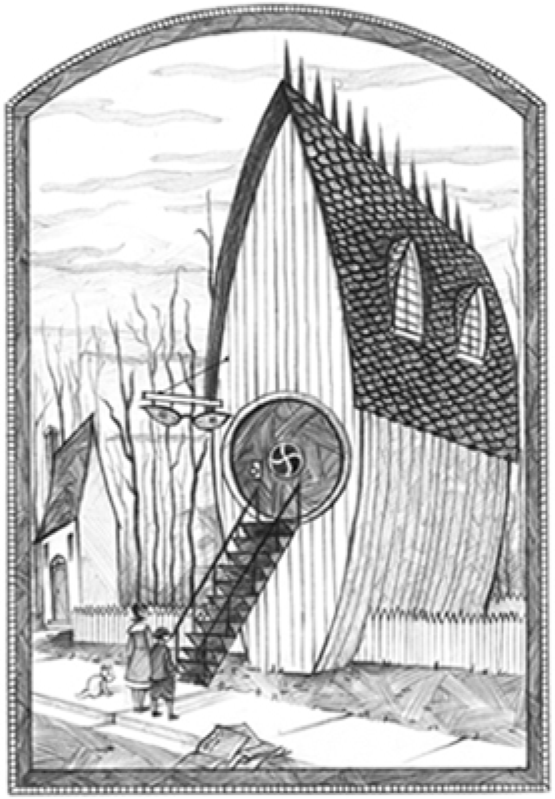
“Oh, Klaus,” Violet said miserably. “Sunny and I wasted time arguing with Shirley when we should have been rescuing you. You’ve been hypnotized again; I know it. Try to concentrate, Klaus. Try to remember what happened.”

“I broke my glasses,” Klaus said slowly, “and then we left the lumbermill.…I’m very tired, Veronica. Can I go to bed?”

“*Violet*,” Violet said. “My name is *Violet*, not Veronica.”

“I’m sorry,” Klaus said. “I’m just so tired.”

Violet opened the door of the building, and the three orphans stepped out onto the depressing street of Paltryville. Violet and Sunny stopped and remembered when they had first reached the lumbermill after getting off the train, and had seen the eye-shaped building. Their instincts had told them that the building was trouble, but the children had not listened to their instincts. They had listened to Mr. Poe.



“We’d better take him to the dormitory,” Violet said to Sunny. “I don’t know what else we can do with Klaus in this state. Then we should tell Sir what has happened. I hope he can help us.”

“Guree,” Sunny agreed glumly. The sisters led their brother through the wooden gates of the mill, and across the dirt-floored courtyard to the dormitory. It was almost suppertime, and when the children walked inside they could see the other employees sitting on their bunks and talking quietly among themselves.

“I see you’re back,” one of the workers said. “I’m surprised you can show your faces around here, after what you did to Phil.”

“Oh, come now,” Phil said, and the orphans turned to see him lying down on his bunk with his leg in a cast. “Klaus didn’t mean to do it, did you, Klaus?”

“Mean to do what?” Klaus asked quizzically, a word which here means “because he didn’t know that he caused the accident that hurt Phil’s leg.”

“Our brother is very tired,” Violet said quickly. “How are you feeling, Phil?”

“Oh, perfectly fine,” Phil said. “My leg hurts, but nothing else does. I’m really quite fortunate. But enough about me. There’s a memo that was left for you. Foreman Flacutono said it was very important.”

Phil handed Violet an envelope with the word “Baudelaires” typed on the front, just like the typed note of welcome the children had found on their first day at the mill. Inside the envelope was a note, which read as follows:

Memorandum

To: The Baudelaire Orphans

From: Sir

Subject: Today’s Accident

> I have been informed that you caused an accident this morning at the mill that injured an employee and disrupted the day’s work.

Accidents are caused by bad workers, and bad workers are not tolerated at the Lucky Smells Lumbermill. If you continue to cause accidents I will be forced to fire you and send you to live elsewhere. I have located a nice young lady who lives in town who would be happy to adopt three young children. Her name is Shirley and she works as a receptionist. If the three of you continue to be bad workers, I will place you under her care.

CHAPTER
Ten

Violet read the memo out loud to her siblings, and she didn't know whose reaction was more upsetting. As Sunny heard the bad news, she bit her lip in worry. Her tooth was so sharp that tiny drops of blood dribbled down her chin, and this was certainly upsetting. But Klaus didn't seem to hear the memo at all. He just stared into space, and this was worrisome as well. Violet put the memo back into the envelope, sat on the bottom bunk, and wondered what in the world she could do.

"Bad news?" Phil said sympathetically. "Remember, sometimes something might seem like bad news, but it could turn out to be a blessing in disguise."

Violet tried to smile at Phil, but her smiling muscles just stayed put. She knew—or she thought she knew, anyway, because she was actually wrong—that the only thing in disguise was Count Olaf. "We have to go see Sir," Violet said finally. "We have to explain to him what has happened."

"You're not supposed to see Sir without an appointment," Phil said.

“This is an emergency,” Violet said. “Come on, Sunny. Come on…” She looked at her brother, who looked back at his older sister with wide, wide eyes. Violet remembered the accident he had caused, and all the previous Baudelaire guardians who had been destroyed. She could not imagine that Klaus would be capable of the sort of heinous murders that Count Olaf had committed, but she could not be sure. Not when he was hypnotized.

“Dinel,” Sunny said.

“Klaus simply cannot go,” Violet decided. “Phil, will you please keep an eye on our brother while we go and visit Sir?”

“Of course,” Phil said.

“A *very close eye*,” she emphasized, leading Klaus to the Baudelaire bunk. “He’s…he’s not been himself lately, as I’m sure you’ve noticed. Please make sure he stays out of trouble.”

“I will,” Phil promised.

“Now, Klaus,” Violet said, “please get some sleep, and I hope you’ll feel better in the morning.”

“Wub,” Sunny said, which meant something along the lines of “I hope so, too.”

Klaus lay down on the bunk, and his sisters looked at his bare feet, which were filthy from walking around all day without any shoes on. “Good night, Violet,” Klaus said. “Good night, Susan.”

“Her name is *Sunny*,” Violet said.

“I’m sorry,” Klaus said. “I’m just so exhausted. Do you really think I will feel better in the morning?”

“If we’re lucky,” Violet said. “Now, go to sleep.”

Klaus glanced at his older sister. “Yes, sir,” he said, quietly. He shut his eyes and immediately fell asleep. The eldest Baudelaire tucked the blanket around her brother and took a long, worried glance at him. Then she took Sunny’s hand and, with a smile to Phil, walked back out of the dormitory and across the courtyard to the offices. Inside, the two Baudelaires walked past the mirror without even a glance at their reflections, and knocked on the door.

“Come in!” The children recognized the booming voice of Sir, and nervously opened the door to the office. Sir was sitting at an enormous desk made of dark, dark wood, still smoking a cigar so his face could not be seen behind the cloud of smoke. The desk was covered with papers and folders, and there was a name-plate that read “The Boss” in letters made of chewed-up gum, just like the lumbermill sign outside. It was difficult to see the rest of the room, because there was only one tiny light in the room, which sat on Sir’s desk. Next to Sir stood Charles, who gave the children a shy smile as they walked up to their guardian.

“Do you have an appointment?” Sir asked.

“No,” Violet said, “but it’s very important that I talk to you.”

“I’ll decide what’s very important!” Sir barked. “You see this nameplate? It says ‘The Boss,’ and that’s who I am! It’s very important when *I* say it’s very important, understand?”

“Yes, Sir,” Violet said, “but I think you’ll agree with me when I explain what’s been going on.”

“I *know* what’s been going on,” Sir said. “I’m the boss! Of course I know! Didn’t you get my memo about the accident?”

Violet took a deep breath and looked Sir in the eye, or at least the part of the cloud of smoke where she thought his eye probably was. “The accident,” she said finally, “happened because Klaus was hypnotized.”

“What your brother does for a hobby is none of my concern,” Sir said, “and it doesn’t excuse accidents.”

“You don’t understand, Sir,” Violet said. “Klaus was hypnotized by Dr. Orwell, who is in cahoots with Count Olaf.”

“Oh no!” Charles said. “You poor children! Sir, we have to put a stop to this!”

“We *are* putting a stop to this!” Sir said. “You children will cause no more accidents, and you’ll be safely employed by this lumbermill. Otherwise, out you go!”

“Sir!” Charles cried. “You wouldn’t throw the children out into the street!”

“Of course not,” Sir said. “As I explained in my memo, I met a very nice young lady who works as a receptionist. When I mentioned there were three children in my care, she said that if you were ever any trouble, she’d take you, because she’d always wanted children of her own.”

“Palsh!” Sunny cried.

“That’s Count Olaf!” Violet cried.

“Do I look like an idiot to you?” Sir asked, pointing to his cloud. “I have a complete description of Count Olaf from Mr. Poe, and this receptionist looked nothing like him. She was a very nice lady.”

“Did you look for the tattoo?” Charles asked. “Count Olaf has a tattoo on his ankle, remember?”

“Of course I didn’t look for the tattoo,” Sir said impatiently. “It’s not polite to look at a woman’s legs.”

“But she’s not a woman!” Violet burst out. “I mean, *he’s* not a woman! He’s Count Olaf!”

“I saw her nameplate,” Sir said. “It didn’t say ‘Count Olaf.’ It said ‘Shirley.’”

“Fiti!” Sunny shrieked, which you already know meant “That nameplate doesn’t prove anything, of course!” But Violet did not have time to translate, because Sir was pounding his hands on the desk.

“Hypnosis! Count Olaf! Fiti! I’ve had enough of your excuses!” he yelled. “Your job is to work hard at the lumbermill, not cause accidents! I am busy enough without having to deal with clumsy children!”

Quickly, Violet thought of something else. “Well, can we call Mr. Poe?” she asked. “He knows all about Count Olaf, so perhaps he can be helpful.” Violet did not add that Mr. Poe was not usually a very helpful person.

“You want to add the cost of a long-distance phone call to the burden of caring for you?” Sir asked. “I think not. Let me put it to you in the simplest way I can: If you screw up again, I will give you away to Shirley.”

“Now, Sir,” Charles said. “These are children. You shouldn’t talk to them this way. As you remember, I never thought it was a good idea for the Baudelaires to work in the mill. They should be treated like members of the family.”

“They *are* being treated like members of the family,” Sir said. “Many of my cousins live there in the dormitory. I refuse to argue with you, Charles! You’re my partner! Your job is to iron my shirts and cook my omelettes, not boss me around!”

“You’re right, of course,” Charles said softly. “I’m sorry.”

“Now get out of here, all of you!” Sir barked. “I have lots of work to do!”

Sunny opened her mouth to say something, but she knew it would be useless. Violet thought of something else she could point out, but she knew it would be worthless. And Charles started to raise his hand to make a point, but he knew it would be bootless, a word which here means “useless and worthless.” So Charles and the two Baudelaires left the dark office without another word, and stood for a moment together in the hallway.

“Don’t worry,” Charles whispered. “I’ll help you.”

“How?” Violet whispered back. “Will you call Mr. Poe and tell him Count Olaf is here?”

“Ulo?” Sunny asked, which meant “Will you have Dr. Orwell arrested?”

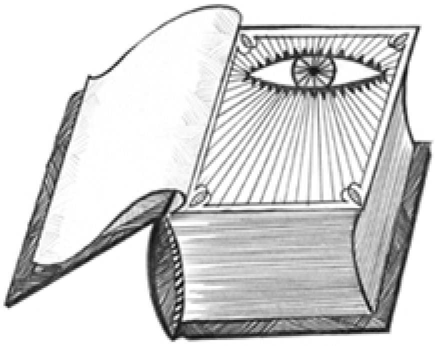
“Will you hide us from Shirley?” Violet asked.

“Henipul?” Sunny asked, which meant “Will you undo Klaus’s hypnotism?”

“No,” Charles admitted. “I can’t do any of those things. Sir would get mad at me, and we can’t have that. But tomorrow, I will try and sneak you some raisins at lunchtime. O.K.?”

It was not O.K., of course, not at all. Raisins are healthy, and they are inexpensive, and some people may even find them delicious. But they are rarely considered helpful. In fact, raisins were one of the least helpful things Charles could offer, if he really wanted to help. But Violet didn’t answer him. She was looking down the hallway and thinking. Sunny didn’t answer him either, because she was already crawling toward the door to the library. The Baudelaire sisters had no time to talk with Charles. They had to figure out a plan, and they had to figure it out quickly. The Baudelaire orphans were in a very difficult situation, and they needed every available moment to come up with something much, much more helpful than raisins.

CHAPTER
Eleven



As we have discussed previously, a book's first sentence can often tell you what sort of story the book contains. This book, you will remember, began with the sentence "The Baudelaire orphans looked out the grimy window of the train and gazed at the gloomy blackness of the Finite Forest, wondering if their lives would ever get any better," and the story has certainly been as wretched and hopeless as the first sentence promised it would be. I only bring this up now so you can understand the feeling of dread that Violet and Sunny Baudelaire experienced as they opened a book in the library of the Lucky Smells Lumbermill. The two Baudelaire sisters already had a feeling of dread, of course. Part of the dread came from how cruelly unfairly Sir had behaved. Another part of the dread came from how Charles, kind as he was, seemed unable to help them. Yet another part of the dread came from the fact that Klaus had been hypnotized once more. And of course, the lion's share of the dread—the phrase "lion's share" here means "the biggest part" and has nothing to do with lions or sharing—came from the fact that Count Olaf—or, as he insisted on calling himself, Shirley—was back in the Baudelaires' lives and causing so much misery.

But there was an extra helping of dread that Violet and Sunny felt when they began *Advanced Ocular Science*, by Dr. Georgina Orwell. The first sentence was "This tome will endeavor to scrutinize, in quasi-inclusive breadth, the epistemology of ophthalmologically contrived appraisals of ocular systems and the subsequent and requisite exertions imperative for expugnation of injurious states," and as Violet read it out loud to her sister, both children felt the dread that comes when you begin a very boring and difficult book.

"Oh dear," Violet said, wondering what in the world "tome" meant. "This is a very difficult book."

"Garj!" Sunny said, wondering what in the world "endeavor" meant.

"If only we had a dictionary," Violet said glumly. "Then we might be able to figure out what this sentence means."

"Yash!" Sunny pointed out, which meant something like "And if only Klaus weren't hypnotized, then he could *tell* us what this sentence means."

Violet and Sunny sighed, and thought of their poor hypnotized brother. Klaus seemed so different from the brother they knew that it was almost as if Count Olaf had already succeeded with his dastardly scheme, and destroyed one of the Baudelaire orphans. Klaus usually looked interested in the world around him, and now he had a blank expression on his face. His eyes were usually all squinty from reading, and now they were wide as if he had been watching TV instead. He was usually alert, and full of interesting things to say, and now he was forgetful, and almost completely silent.

"Who knows if Klaus could define these words for us?" Violet asked. "He said it felt like part of his brain had been wiped clean. Maybe he doesn't know all those words when he's hypnotized. I don't think I've heard him define anything since the accident with Phil, when he explained the word 'inordinate.' You might as well get some rest, Sunny. I'll wake you up if I read anything useful."

Sunny crawled up on the table and lay down next to *Advanced Ocular Science*, which was almost as big as she was. Violet gazed at her sister for a moment, and then turned her attention to the book. Violet liked to read, of course, but at heart she was an inventor, not a researcher. She simply did not have Klaus's amazing reading skills. Violet stared at Dr. Orwell's first sentence again, and just saw a mess of difficult words. She knew that if Klaus were in the library, and not hypnotized, he would see a way to help them out of their situation. Violet began to imagine how her brother would go about reading *Advanced Ocular Science*, and tried to copy his methods.

First she turned back the pages of the book, back before even the first page, to the table of contents, which as I'm sure you know is a list of the titles and page numbers of each chapter in a book. Violet had paid scarcely any attention to it when she first opened the book, but she realized that Klaus would probably examine the table of contents first, so he could see which chapters of the book might be most helpful. Quickly she scanned the table of contents:

1.	Introduction	1
2.	Basic Ophthalmology	105
3.	Nearsightedness and Farsightedness	279
4.	Blindness	311
5.	Itchy Eyelashes	398
6.	Damaged Pupils	501
7.	Blinking Problems	612
8.	Winking Problems	650
9.	Surgical Practices	783
10.	Glasses, Monocles, and Contact Lenses	857
11.	Sunglasses	926

12. Hypnosis and Mind Control	927
13. Which Eye Color Is the Best One?	1,000

Immediately, of course, Violet saw that chapter twelve would be the most helpful, and was glad she’d thought of looking at the table of contents instead of reading 927 pages until she found something helpful. Grateful that she could skip that daunting first paragraph—the word “daunting” here means “full of incredibly difficult words”—she flipped through *Advanced Ocular Science* until she reached “Hypnosis and Mind Control.”

The phrase “stylistic consistency” is used to describe books that are similar from start to finish. For instance, the book you are reading right now has stylistic consistency, because it began in a miserable way and will continue that way until the last page. I’m sorry to say that Violet realized, as she began chapter twelve, that Dr. Orwell’s book had stylistic consistency as well. The first sentence of “Hypnosis and Mind Control” was “Hypnosis is an efficacious yet precarious methodology and should not be assayed by neophytes,” and it was every bit as difficult and boring as the first sentence of the whole book. Violet reread the sentence, and then reread it again, and her heart began to sink. How in the world did Klaus do it? When the three children lived in the Baudelaire home, there was a huge dictionary in their parents’ library, and Klaus would often use it to help him with difficult books. But how did Klaus read difficult books when there was no dictionary to be found? It was a puzzle, and Violet knew it was a puzzle she had to solve quickly.

She turned her attention back to the book, and reread the sentence one more time, but this time she simply skipped the words she did not know. As often happens when one reads in this way, Violet’s brain made a little humming noise as she encountered each word—or each part of a word—she did not know. So inside her head, the opening sentence of chapter twelve read as follows: “‘Hypnosis is an *hmmm* yet *hmmm* method *hmmm* and should not be *hmmm*ed by *hmmm*s’” and although she could not tell exactly what it meant, she could guess. “It could mean,” she guessed to herself, “that hypnosis is a difficult method and should not be learned by amateurs,” and the interesting thing is that she was not too far off. The night grew later and later, and Violet continued to read the chapter in this way, and she was surprised to learn that she could guess her way through pages and pages of Dr. Orwell’s book. This is not the best way to read, of course, because you can make horribly wrong guesses, but it will do in an emergency.

For several hours, the Lucky Smells library was completely quiet except for the turning of pages, as Violet read the book searching for anything helpful. Every so often she glanced at her sister, and for the first time in her life Violet wished that Sunny were older than she was. When you are trying to figure out a difficult problem—such as the problem of trying to get your brother unhypnotized so as not to be placed into the hands of a greedy man disguised as a receptionist—it is often helpful to discuss the problem with other people in order to come up with a quick and useful solution. Violet remembered that, when the Baudelaires were living with Aunt Josephine, it had been extremely helpful to talk to Klaus about a note that turned out to have a secret hidden within it. But with Sunny it was different. The youngest Baudelaire was charming, and well toothed, and quite intelligent for a baby. But she was still a baby, and as Violet *hmm*ed through chapter twelve, she worried that she would fail to find a solution with only a baby as a discussion partner. Nevertheless, when she found a sentence that appeared to be useful, she gave Sunny a waking nudge and read the sentence out loud.

“Listen to this, Sunny,” she said, when her sister opened her eyes. “‘Once a subject has been hypnotized, a simple *hmmm* word will make him or her perform whatever *hmmm* acts any *hmmm* wants *hmmm*ed.’”

“*Hmmm*?” Sunny asked.

“Those are the words I don’t know,” Violet explained. “It’s difficult to read this way, but I can guess what Dr. Orwell means. I think she means that once you’ve hypnotized someone, all you need to do is say a certain word and they will obey you. Remember what Klaus told us he learned from the *Encyclopedia Hypnotica*? There was that Egyptian king who did chicken imitations, and the merchant who played the violin, and that writer, and all the hypnotists did was say a certain word. But they were all different words. I wonder which word applies to Klaus."

"Heece," Sunny said, which probably meant something like "Beats me. I'm only a baby."

Violet gave her a gentle smile and tried to imagine what Klaus would have said if he had been there, unhypnotized, in the library with his sisters. "I'll search for more information," she decided.

"Brewol," Sunny said, which meant "And I'll go back to sleep."

Both Baudelaires were true to their word, and for a time the library was silent again. Violet *hmmm*ed through the book and grew more and more exhausted and worried. There were only a few hours left until the working day began, and she was scared that her efforts would be as ineffectual—the word "ineffectual" here means "unable to get Klaus unhypnotized"—as if she had low self-esteem. But just as she was about to fall asleep beside her sister, she found a passage in the book that seemed so useful she read it out loud immediately, waking Sunny up in the process.

"'In order to *hmmm* the hypnotic hold on the *hmmm,*'" Violet said, "'the same method *hmmm* is used: a *hmmm* word, uttered out loud, will *hmmm* the *hmmm* immediately.' I think Dr. Orwell is talking about getting people unhypnotized, and it has to do with another word being uttered out loud. If we figure *that* one out, we can unhypnotize Klaus, and we won't fall into Shirley's clutches."

"Skel," Sunny said, rubbing her eyes. She probably meant something like "But I wonder what that word could be."

"I don't know," Violet said, "but we'd better figure it out before it's too late."

"Hmmm," Sunny said, making a humming noise because she was thinking, rather than because she was reading a word she did not know.

“Hmmm,” Violet said, which meant *she* was thinking, too. But then there was another *hmmm* that made the two Baudelaire sisters look at one another in worry. This was not the *hmmm* of a brain that did not know what a word meant, or the *hmmm* of a person thinking. This *hmmm* was much longer and louder, and it was a *hmmm* that made the Baudelaire sisters stop their thinking and hurry out of the library, clutching Dr. Orwell’s book in their trembling hands. It was the *hmmm* of the lumbermill’s saw. Somebody had turned on the mill’s deadliest machine in the early, early hours of morning.

Violet and Sunny hurried across the courtyard, which was quite dark in the first few rays of the sun. Hurriedly they opened the doors of the mill and looked inside. Foreman Flacutono was standing near the entrance, with his back to the two girls, pointing a finger and giving an order. The rusty sawing machine was whirring away, making that dreadful humming sound, and there was a log on the ground, all ready to be pushed into the saw. The log seemed to be covered in layers and layers of string—the string that had been inside the string machine, before Klaus had smashed it.

The two sisters took a better look, stepping farther into the mill, and saw that the string was wrapped around something else, tying a large bundle to the log. And when they took an even better look, peeking from behind Foreman Flacutono, they saw that the bundle was Charles. He was tied to the log with so much string that he looked a bit like a cocoon, except that a cocoon had never looked this frightened. Layers of string were covering his mouth, so he could not make a sound, but his eyes were uncovered and he was staring in terror at the saw as it drew closer and closer.

“Yes, you little twerp,” Foreman Flacutono was saying. “You’ve been fortunate so far, avoiding my boss’s clutches, but no more. One more accident and you’ll be ours, and this will be the worst accident the lumbermill has ever seen. Just imagine Sir’s displeasure when he learns that his partner has been sliced into human boards. Now, you lucky man, go and push the log into the saw!”

Violet and Sunny took a few more steps forward, near enough that they could reach out and touch Foreman Flacutono—not that they wanted to do such a disgusting thing, of course—and saw their brother. Klaus was standing at the controls of the sawing machine in his bare feet, staring at the foreman with his wide, blank eyes.

“Yes, sir,” he said, and Charles’s eyes grew wide with panic.

CHAPTER
Twelve

"*Klaus*!" Violet cried. "Klaus, don't do it!"

Foreman Flacutono whirled around, his beady eyes glaring from over his surgical mask. "Why, if it isn't the other two midgets," he said. "You're just in time to see the accident."

"It's not an accident," Violet said. "You're doing it on purpose!"

"Let's not split hairs," the foreman said, using an expression which here means "argue over something that's not at all important."

"You've been in on this all the time!" Violet shouted. "You're in cahoots with Dr. Orwell, and Shirley!"

“So what?” Foreman Flacutono said.

“Deluny!” Sunny shrieked, which meant something along the lines of “You’re not just a bad foreman—you’re an evil person!”

“I don’t know what you mean, little midget,” Foreman Flacutono said, “and I don’t care. Klaus, you lucky boy, please continue.”

“No, Klaus!” Violet shouted. “No!”

“Kewtu!” Sunny shrieked.

“Your words will do no good,” Foreman Flacutono said. “See?”

Sunny saw, all right, as she watched her barefoot brother walking over to the log as if his sisters had not spoken. But Violet was not looking at her brother. She was looking at Foreman Flacutono, and thinking of everything he had said. The terrible foreman was right, of course. The words of the two unhypnotized Baudelaires would do no good. But Violet knew that some words would help. The book she was holding had told her, in between *hmmm*s, that there was a word that was used to command Klaus, and a word that would unhypnotize him. The eldest Baudelaire realized that Foreman Flacutono must have used the command word just now, and she was trying to remember everything that he had said. He’d called Klaus a twerp, but it seemed unlikely that “twerp” would be the word. He’d said “log” and he’d said “push,” but those didn’t seem likely either. She realized with despair that the command word could almost be anything.

“That’s right,” Foreman Flacutono said, as Klaus reached the log. “Now, in the name of Lucky Smells Lumbermill, push the log in the path of the saw.”

Violet closed her eyes and racked her brain, a phrase which here means “tried to think of other times the command word must have been used.” Foreman Flacutono must have used it when Klaus caused the first accident, the one that broke Phil’s leg. “*You*, you lucky midget,” Violet remembered the foreman had said, “will be operating the machine,” and Klaus had said

"Yes, sir" in that faint, hypnotized voice, the same voice he had used before he had gone to sleep just the previous night.

"Egu!" Sunny shrieked in fear, as the *hmmm* of the saw grew louder and rougher. Klaus had pushed the log up to the saw, and Charles's eyes grew even wider as the blade began to slice the wood, getting closer and closer to where Charles was tied up.

As she remembered Klaus's "Yes, sir," before he went to sleep, Violet realized she must have used the command word herself, by accident. She racked her brain again, straining to remember the conversation. Klaus had called his baby sister Susan, instead of Sunny, and then asked if he would really feel better in the morning. But what had Violet replied?

"Keep pushing, you lucky midget," Foreman Flacutono said, and Violet knew in an instant.

Lucky.

"*Lucky*!" the eldest Baudelaire shouted, not bothering to hide the word in a sentence, as the foreman did. "Push the log away from the saw, Klaus!"

"Yes, sir," Klaus said quietly, and the Baudelaire sisters saw with relief that he pushed the log away from the whirling blade just as Charles's toes were about to be sliced. Foreman Flacutono whirled around and stared at Violet in beady rage. She knew that he knew that she knew.

"*Lucky*!" he snarled. "Push the log back toward the saw, Klaus!"

"Yes, sir," Klaus muttered.

"*Lucky*!" Violet cried. "Push the log away!"

"Yes, sir," Klaus murmured.

"*Lucky*!" Foreman Flacutono barked. "Toward the saw!"

"*Lucky away*!"

“*Lucky toward the saw*!”

“*Lucky away*!”

“*Lucky toward the saw*!”

“*LUCKY*!” bellowed a new voice from the doorway, and everyone—including Violet, Klaus, Sunny, and Foreman Flacutono—turned around. Even Charles tried the best he could to see Dr. Orwell, who had appeared in the doorway along with Shirley, who was lurking behind the hypnotist.

“We just stopped by to make sure everything went well,” Dr. Orwell said, gesturing to the saw with her black cane. “And I’m certainly glad we did. *Lucky*!” she shouted to Klaus. “Do not listen to your sisters!”

“What a good idea,” Foreman Flacutono said the doctor. “I never thought of that.”

“That’s why you’re only a foreman,” Dr. Orwell replied snobbily. “*Lucky*, Klaus! Push the log in the path of the saw!”

“Yes, sir,” Klaus said, and began to push the log again.

“*Please*, Klaus!” Violet cried. “Don’t do this!”

“Gice!” Sunny shrieked, which meant “Don’t hurt Charles!”

“*Please*, Dr. Orwell!” Violet cried. “Don’t force my brother to do this terrible thing!”

“It *is* a terrible thing, I know,” Dr. Orwell said. “But it’s a terrible thing that the Baudelaire fortune goes to you three brats, instead of to me and Shirley. We’re going to split the money fifty-fifty.”

“After expenses, Georgina,” Shirley reminded her.

“After expenses, of course,” Dr. Orwell said.

The *hmmm* of the saw began making its louder, rougher sound as the blade started to slice the log once more. Tears appeared in Charles's eyes and began to run down the string tying him to the log. Violet looked at her brother, and then at Dr. Orwell, and dropped the heavy book on the ground in frustration. What she needed now, and most desperately, was the word that would unhypnotize her brother, but she had no idea what it could be. The command word had been used many times, and Violet had been able to figure out which word had been used over and over. But Klaus had only been unhypnotized once, after the accident that had broken Phil's leg. She and her sister had known, in the moment he started defining a word for the employees, that Klaus was back to normal, but who knew what word caused him, that afternoon, to suddenly stop following Foreman Flacutono's orders? Violet looked from Charles's tears to the ones appearing in Sunny's eyes as the fatal accident grew nearer and nearer. In a moment, it seemed, they would watch Charles die a horrible death, and then they would most certainly be placed in Shirley's care. After so many narrow escapes from Count Olaf's treachery, this seemed to be the moment of his—or in this case, *her*— terrible triumph. Out of all the situations, Violet thought to herself, that she and her siblings had been in, this was the most miserably irregular. It was the most miserably immoderate. It was the most miserably disorderly. It was the most miserably excessive. And as she thought all these words she thought of the one that had unhypnotized Klaus, the one that just might save all their lives.

"*Inordinate*!" she shouted, as loudly as she could to be heard over the terrible noise of the saw. "*Inordinate! Inordinate! Inordinate*!"

Klaus blinked, and then looked all around him as if somebody had just dropped him in the middle of the mill. "Where am I?" he asked.

"Oh, Klaus," Violet said in relief. "You're here with us!"

"Drat!" Dr. Orwell said. "He's unhypnotized! How in the world would a child know a complicated word like 'inordinate'?"

"These brats know lots of words," Shirley said, in her ridiculously fake high voice. "They're book addicts. But we can still create an accident and win the fortune!"

“Oh no you can’t!” Klaus cried, and stepped forward to push Charles out of the way.

“Oh yes we can!” Foreman Flacutono said, and stuck his foot out again. You would think that such a trick would only work a maximum of two times, but in this case you would be wrong, and in this case Klaus fell to the floor again, his head clanging against the pile of debarkers and tiny green boxes.

“Oh no you can’t!” Violet cried, and stepped forward to push Charles out of the way herself.

“Oh yes we can!” Shirley said, in her silly high voice, and grabbed Violet’s arm. Foreman Flacutono quickly grabbed her other arm, and the eldest Baudelaire found herself trapped.

“Oh toonoy!” Sunny cried, and crawled toward Charles. She was not strong enough to push the log away from the saw, but she thought she could bite through his string and set him free.

“Oh yes we can!” Dr. Orwell said, and reached down to grab the youngest Baudelaire. But Sunny was ready. Quickly she opened her mouth and bit down on the hypnotist’s hand as hard as she could.

“*Gack*!” Dr. Orwell shouted, using an expression that is in no particular language. But then she smiled and used an expression that was in French: “*En garde*!” “En garde!,” as you may know, is an expression people use when they wish to announce the beginning of a sword-fight, and with a wicked smile, Dr. Orwell pressed the red jewel on top of her black cane, and a shiny blade emerged from the opposite end. In just one second, her cane had become a sword, which she then pointed at the youngest Baudelaire orphan. But Sunny, being only an infant, had no sword. She only had her four sharp teeth, and, looking Dr. Orwell right in the eye, she opened her mouth and pointed all four at this despicable person.

There is a loud *clink*! noise that a sword makes when it hits another sword—or, in this case, a tooth—and whenever I hear it I am reminded of a swordfight I was forced to have with a television repairman not long ago.

Sunny, however, was only reminded of how much she did not want to be sliced to bits. Dr. Orwell swung her cane-sword at Sunny, and Sunny swung her teeth at Dr. Orwell, and soon the *clink*! noises were almost as loud as the sawing machine which continued to saw up the log toward Charles. *Clink*! Up, up, the blade inched until it was only a hair's breadth—the expression "hair's breadth" here means "a teeny-tiny measurement"—away from Charles's foot.

"Klaus!" Violet cried, struggling in the grips of Shirley and Foreman Flacutono. "Do something!"

"Your brother can't do anything!" Shirley said, giggling in a most annoying way. "He's just been unhypnotized—he's too dazed to do anything. Foreman Flacutono, let's both pull! We can make Violet's armpits sore that way!"

Shirley was right about Violet's sore armpits, but she was wrong about Klaus. He *had* just been unhypnotized, and he *was* quite dazed, but he wasn't too dazed to do anything. The trouble was, he simply couldn't think of what to do. Klaus had been thrown into the corner with the debarkers and the gum, and if he moved in the direction of Charles, or Violet, he would walk right into Sunny and Dr. Orwell's sword-fight, and as he heard another *clink*! from the sword hitting Sunny's tooth he knew he would be seriously wounded if he tried to walk through the dueling pair. But over the *clink*! he heard an even louder and even rougher noise from the sawing machine, and Klaus saw with horror that the blade was beginning to slice through the soles of Charles's shoes. Sir's partner tried to wiggle his feet away from the blade, but they were tied too tightly, and tiny shoe-sole shavings began to fall to the floor of the mill. In a moment the blade would be finished with the sole of Charles's shoe and begin on the sole of Charles's foot. Klaus needed to invent something to stop the machine, and he needed to invent it right away.

Klaus stared at the circular blade of the saw, and his heart began to sink. How in the world did Violet do it? Klaus had a mild interest in mechanical things, but at heart he was a reader, not an inventor. He simply did not have Violet's amazing inventing skills. He looked at the machine and just saw a deadly device, but he knew that if Violet were in this corner of the mill, and not getting sore armpits from Shirley and Foreman Flacutono, she would see a way to help them out of their situation. Klaus tried to imagine how his sister would go about inventing something right there on the spot, and tried to copy her methods.

Clink! Klaus looked around him for inventing materials, but saw only debarkers and tiny green boxes of gum. Immediately he ripped open a box of gum and shoved several pieces into his mouth, chewing ferociously. The expression "gum up the works" does not actually have to do with gum, but merely refers to something that stops the progress of something else. Klaus chewed and chewed the gum, hoping that the stickiness of the gum could gum up the works of the sawing machine, and stop the deadly progress of its blade.

Clink! Sunny's third tooth hit the blade of Dr. Orwell's sword, and Klaus quickly spat the gum out of his mouth into his hand and threw it at the machine as hard as he could. But it merely fell to the ground with a wet *plop*! Klaus realized that gum didn't weigh enough to reach the machine. Like a feather, or a piece of paper, the wad of gum simply couldn't be thrown very far.

Hukkita—hukkita—hukkita! The machine began making the loudest and roughest sound Klaus had ever heard. Charles closed his eyes, and Klaus knew that the blade must have hit the bottom of his foot. He grabbed a bigger handful of gum and shoved it into his mouth, but he didn't know if he could chew enough gum to make a heavy enough invention. Unable to watch the saw any longer, he looked down, and when his eye fell upon one of the debarkers he knew he could invent something after all.

When Klaus looked at the lumbermill equipment, he remembered a time when he was even more bored than he had been when working at Lucky Smells. This especially boring time had happened a very long time ago, when the Baudelaire parents were still alive. Klaus had read a book on different kinds of fish, and asked his parents if they would take him fishing. His mother warned him that fishing was one of the most boring activities in the world, but found two fishing poles in the basement and agreed to take him to a nearby lake. Klaus had been hoping that he would get to see the different types of fish he had read about, but instead he and his mother sat in a rowboat in the middle of a lake and did nothing for an entire afternoon. He and his mother had to keep quiet, so as not to scare the fish away, but there were no fish, no conversation, and absolutely no fun. You might think that Klaus would not want to remember such a boring time, particularly in the middle of a crisis, but one detail of this very boring afternoon turned out to be extremely helpful.

As Sunny struggled with Dr. Orwell, Violet struggled with Shirley and Foreman Flacutono, and poor Charles struggled with the saw, Klaus remembered the part of the fishing process known as casting. Casting is the process of using one's fishing pole to throw one's fishing line out into the middle of the lake in order to try to catch a fish. In the case of Klaus and his mother, the casting hadn't worked, but Klaus did not want to catch fish. He wanted to save Charles's life.

Quickly, the middle Baudelaire grabbed the debarker and spat his gum onto one end of it. He was planning to use the sticky gum as a sort of fishing line and the debarker as a sort of fishing pole, in order to throw gum all the way to the saw. Klaus's invention looked more like a wad of gum at the end of a strip of metal than a real fishing pole, but Klaus didn't care how it looked. He only cared whether it could stop the saw. He took a deep breath, and cast the debarker the way his mother taught him to cast his fishing pole.

Plop! To Klaus's delight, the gum stretched over Dr. Orwell and Sunny, who were still fighting, just as fishing line will stretch out across the surface of a lake. But to Klaus's horror, the gum did not land on the saw. It landed on the string that was tying the wriggling Charles to the log. Klaus watched Charles wriggle and was once again reminded of a fish, and it occurred to him that perhaps his invention had worked after all. Gathering up all of his strength—and, after working at a lumbermill for a while, he actually had quite a bit of strength for a young boy—he grabbed his invention, and pulled. Klaus pulled on his debarker, and the debarker pulled on the gum, and the gum pulled on the log, and to the relief of all three Baudelaire orphans the log moved to one side. It did not move very far, and it did not move very quickly, and it certainly did not move very gracefully, but it moved enough. The horrible noise stopped, and the blade of the saw kept slicing, but the log was far enough out of the way that the machine was simply slicing thin air. Charles looked at Klaus, and his eyes filled with tears, and when Sunny turned to look she saw that Klaus was crying, too.

But when Sunny turned to look, Dr. Orwell saw her chance. With a swing of one of her big ugly boots, she kicked Sunny to the ground and held her in place with one foot. Then, standing over the infant, she raised her sword high in the air and began to laugh a loud, horrible snarl of a laugh. “I do believe,” she said, cackling, “that there will be an accident at Lucky Smells Lumbermill after all!”

And Dr. Orwell was right. There *was* an accident at the lumbermill, after all, a fatal accident, which is a phrase used to describe one that kills somebody. For just as Dr. Orwell was about to bring her sword down on little Sunny’s throat, the door of the lumbermill opened and Sir walked into the room. “What in the world is going on?” he barked, and Dr. Orwell turned to him, absolutely surprised. When people are absolutely surprised, they sometimes take a step backward, and taking a step backward can sometimes lead to an accident. Such was the case at this moment, for when Dr. Orwell stepped backward, she stepped into the path of the whirring saw, and there was a very ghastly accident indeed.

CHAPTER
Thirteen

“*Dreadful*, dreadful, dreadful,” Sir said, shaking the cloud of smoke that covered his head.

“Dreadful, dreadful, dreadful.”

“I quite agree,” Mr. Poe said, coughing into his handkerchief. “When you called me this morning and described the situation, I thought it was so dreadful that I canceled several important appointments and took the first available train to Paltryville, in order to handle this matter personally.”

“We appreciate it very much,” Charles said.

“Dreadful, dreadful, dreadful,” Sir said again.

The Baudelaire orphans sat together on the floor of Sir’s office and looked up at the adults discussing the situation, wondering how in the world they could talk about it so calmly. The word “dreadful,” even when used three times in a row, did not seem like a dreadful enough word to describe everything that had happened. Violet was still trembling from how Klaus had looked while hypnotized. Klaus was still shivering from how Charles had almost been sliced up. Sunny was still shaking from how she had almost been killed in the swordfight with Dr. Orwell. And, of course, all three orphans were still shuddering from how Dr. Orwell had met her demise, a phrase which here means “stepped into the path of the sawing machine.” The children felt as if they could barely speak at all, let alone participate in a conversation.

“It’s unbelievable,” Sir said, “that Dr. Orwell was really a hypnotist, and that she hypnotized Klaus in order to get ahold of the Baudelaire fortune. Luckily, Violet figured out how to unhypnotize her brother, and he didn’t cause any more accidents.”

“It’s unbelievable,” Charles said, “that Foreman Flacutono grabbed me in the middle of the night, and tied me to that log, in order to get ahold of the Baudelaire fortune. Luckily, Klaus invented something that shoved the log out of the path of the saw just in time, and I only have a small cut on my foot.”

“It’s unbelievable,” Mr. Poe said, after a short cough, “that Shirley was going to adopt the children, in order to get ahold of the Baudelaire fortune. Luckily, we realized her plan, and now she has to go back to being a receptionist.”

At this Violet could keep quiet no longer. “Shirley is not a receptionist!” she cried. “She’s not even Shirley! She’s Count Olaf!”

“Now *that*,” Sir said, “is the part of the story that is so unbelievable that I don’t believe it. I met this young woman, and she isn’t at all like Count Olaf! She has one eyebrow instead of two, that’s true, but plenty of wonderful people have that characteristic!”

“You must forgive the children,” Mr. Poe said. “They tend to see Count Olaf everywhere.”

“That’s because he *is* everywhere,” Klaus said bitterly.

“Well,” Sir said, “he hasn’t been here in Paltryville. We’ve been looking out for him, remember?”

“Weleef!” Sunny cried. She meant something along the lines of “But he was in disguise, as usual!”

“Can we go see this Shirley person?” Charles asked timidly. “The children do seem fairly sure of themselves. Perhaps if Mr. Poe could see this receptionist, we could clear this matter up.”

“I put Shirley and Foreman Flacutono in the library, and asked Phil to keep an eye on them,” Sir said. “Charles’s library turns out to be useful at last—as a substitute jail, until we clear up this matter!”

“The library was plenty useful, Sir,” Violet said. “If I hadn’t read up on hypnosis, your partner, Charles, would be dead.”

“You certainly are a clever child,” Charles said.

“Yes,” Sir agreed. “You’ll do wonderfully at boarding school.”

“Boarding school?” Mr. Poe asked.

“Of course,” Sir replied, nodding his cloud of smoke. “You don’t think I would keep them now, do you, after all the trouble they’ve caused my lumbermill?”

“But that wasn’t our fault!” Klaus cried.

“That doesn’t matter,” Sir said. “We made a deal. The deal was that I would try to keep Count Olaf away, and you wouldn’t cause any more accidents. You didn’t keep your end of the deal.”

“Hech!” Sunny shrieked, which meant “But you didn’t keep your end of the deal, either!” Sir paid no attention.

“Well, let’s go see this woman,” Mr. Poe said, “and we can settle once and for all whether or not Count Olaf was here.”

The three grown-ups nodded, and the three children followed them down the hallway to the library door, where Phil was sitting on a chair with a book in his hands.

“Hello, Phil,” Violet said. “How is your leg?”

“Oh, it’s getting better,” he said, pointing to his cast. “I’ve been guarding the door, Sir, and neither Shirley nor Foreman Flacutono have escaped. Oh, and by the way, I’ve been reading this book, *The Paltryville Constitution*. I don’t understand all of the words, but it sounds like it’s illegal to pay people only in coupons.”

“We’ll talk about that later,” Sir said quickly. “We need to see Shirley about something.”

Sir reached forward and opened the door to reveal Shirley and Foreman Flacutono sitting quietly at two tables near the window. Shirley had Dr. Orwell’s book in one hand and waved at the children with the other.

“Hello there, children!” she called, in her phony high voice. “I was so worried about you!”

“So was I!” Foreman Flacutono said. “Thank goodness I’m unhypnotized now, so I’m not treating you badly any longer!”

“So *you* were hypnotized, too?” Sir asked.

“Of course we were!” Shirley cried. She leaned down and patted all three children on the head. “We never would have acted so dreadfully otherwise, not to three such wonderful and delicate children!” Behind her false eyelashes, Shirley’s shiny eyes gazed at the Baudelaires as if she were going to eat them as soon as she got the opportunity.

“You see?” Sir said to Mr. Poe. “No wonder it was unbelievable that Foreman Flacutono and Shirley acted so horribly. Of course she’s not Count Olaf!”

“Count who?” Foreman Flacutono asked. “I’ve never heard of the man.”

“Me neither,” Shirley said, “but I’m only a receptionist.”

“Perhaps you’re not only a receptionist,” Sir said. “Perhaps you’re also a mother. What do you say, Mr. Poe? Shirley really wants to raise these children, and they’re much too much trouble for me.”

“No!” Klaus cried. “She’s Count Olaf, not Shirley!”

Mr. Poe coughed into his white handkerchief at great length, and the three Baudelaires waited tensely for him to finish coughing and say something. Finally, he removed his handkerchief from his face and said to Shirley, “I’m sorry to say this, ma’am, but the children are convinced that you are a man named Count Olaf, disguised as a receptionist.”

“If you’d like,” Shirley said, “I can take you to Dr. Orwell’s office—the *late* Dr. Orwell’s office—and show you my nameplate. It clearly reads ‘Shirley.’”

“I’m afraid that would not be sufficient,” Mr. Poe said. “Would you do us all the courtesy of showing us your left ankle?”

“Why, it’s not polite to look at a lady’s legs,” Shirley said. “Surely you know that.”

“If your left ankle does not have a tattoo of an eye on it,” Mr. Poe said, “then you are most certainly not Count Olaf.”

Shirley’s eyes shone very, very bright, and she gave everyone in the room a big, toothy smile. “And what if it *does*?” she asked, and hitched up her skirt slightly. “What if it *does* have a tattoo of an eye on it?”

Everyone’s eyes turned to Shirley’s ankle, and one eye looked back at them. It resembled the eye-shaped building of Dr. Orwell, which the Baudelaire orphans felt had been watching them since they arrived in Paltryville. It resembled the eye on the cover of Dr. Orwell’s book, which the Baudelaire orphans felt had been staring at them since they began working at the Lucky Smells Lumbermill. And, of course, it looked exactly like Count Olaf’s tattoo, which is what it was, and which the Baudelaire orphans felt had been gazing at them since their parents had died.

“In that case,” Mr. Poe said, after a pause, “you are not Shirley. You are Count Olaf, and you are under arrest. I order you to take off that ridiculous disguise!”

“Should I take off my ridiculous disguise, as well?” Foreman Flacutono asked, and tore his white wig off with one smooth motion. It did not surprise the children that he was bald—they had known his absurd hair was a wig from the moment they laid eyes on him—but there was something about the shape of his bald head that suddenly seemed familiar. Glaring at the orphans with his beady eyes, he grabbed his surgical mask from his face and removed that, too. A long nose uncurled itself from where it had been pressed down to his face, and the siblings saw in an instant that it was one of Count Olaf’s assistants.

“It’s the bald man!” Violet cried.

“With the long nose!” Klaus cried.

“Plemo!” Sunny cried, which meant “Who works for Count Olaf!”

“I guess we’re lucky enough to capture *two* criminals today,” Mr. Poe said sternly.

“Well, *three*, if you include Dr. Orwell,” Count Olaf—and what a relief it is to call him that, instead of Shirley—said.

“Enough nonsense,” Mr. Poe said. “You, Count Olaf, are under arrest for various murders and attempted murders, various frauds and attempted frauds, and various despicable acts and attempted despicable acts, and *you*, my bald, long-nosed friend, are under arrest for helping him."

Count Olaf shrugged, sending his wig toppling to the floor, and smiled at the Baudelaires in a way they were sorry to recognize. It was a certain smile that Count Olaf had just when it looked like he was trapped. It was a smile that looked as if Count Olaf were telling a joke, and it was a smile accompanied by his eyes shining brightly and his evil brain working furiously. "This book was certainly helpful to you, orphans," Count Olaf said, holding Dr. Orwell's *Advanced Ocular Science* high in the air, "and now it will help me." With all his rotten might, Count Olaf turned and threw the heavy book right through one of the library windows. With a crash of tinkling glass, the window shattered and left a good-sized hole. The hole was just big enough for a person to jump through, which is exactly what the bald man did, wrinkling his long nose at the children as if they smelled bad. Count Olaf laughed a horrible, rough laugh, and followed his comrade out the window and away from Paltryville. "I'll be back for you, orphans!" he called. "I'll be back for your lives!"

"Egad!" Mr. Poe said, using an expression which here means "Oh no! He's escaping!"

Sir stepped quickly to the window, and peered out after Count Olaf and the bald man, who were running as fast as their skinny legs could carry them. "Don't come back here!" Sir yelled out after them. "The orphans won't be here, so don't return!"

"What do you mean, the orphans won't be here?" Mr. Poe asked sternly. "You made a deal, and you didn't keep your end of it! Count Olaf was here after all!"

"That doesn't matter," Sir said, waving one of his hands dismissively. "Wherever these Baudelaires go, misfortune follows, and I will have no more of it!"

"But Sir," Charles said, "they're such good children!"

“I won’t discuss it anymore,” Sir said. “My nameplate says ‘The Boss,’ and that’s who I am. The boss has the last word, and the last word is this: The children are no longer welcome at Lucky Smells!”

Violet, Klaus, and Sunny looked at one another. “The children are no longer welcome at Lucky Smells,” of course, is not the last word, because it is many words, and they knew, of course, that when Sir said “the last word” he didn’t mean one word, but the final opinion on the situation. But their experience at the lumbermill had been so very dreadful that they didn’t care much that they were leaving Paltryville. Even a boarding school sounded like it would be better than their days with Foreman Flacutono, Dr. Orwell, and the evil Shirley. I’m sorry to tell you that the orphans were wrong about boarding school being better, but at the moment they knew nothing of the troubles ahead of them, only of the troubles behind them, and the troubles that had escaped out the window.

“Can we please discuss this matter later,” Violet asked, “and call the police now? Maybe Count Olaf can be caught.”

“Excellent idea, Violet,” Mr. Poe said, although of course he should have thought of this idea earlier himself. “Sir, please take me to your telephone so we can call the authorities.”

“Oh, all right,” Sir said grumpily. “But remember, this is my last word on the matter. Charles, make me a milkshake. I’m very thirsty.”

“Yes, Sir,” Charles said, and limped after his partner and Mr. Poe, who were already out of the library. Halfway out the door, however, he stopped and smiled apologetically at the Baudelaires.

“I’m sorry,” he said to them. “I’m sorry that I won’t be seeing you anymore. But I guess Sir knows best.”

“We’re sorry too, Charles,” Klaus said. “And I’m sorry that I caused you so much trouble.”

“It wasn’t your fault,” Charles said kindly, as Phil limped up behind him.

“What happened?” Phil asked. “I heard breaking glass.”

“Count Olaf got away,” Violet said, and her heart sank as she realized it was really true. “Shirley was really Count Olaf in disguise, and he got away, just like he always does.”

“Well, if you look on the bright side, you’re really quite lucky,” Phil said, and the orphans gave their optimistic friend a curious look and then looked curiously at one another. Once they had been happy children, so content and pleased with their life that they hadn’t even known how happy they were. Then came the terrible fire, and it seemed since then that their lives had scarcely had one bright moment, let alone an entire bright side. From home to home they traveled, encountering misery and wretchedness wherever they went, and now the man who had caused such wretchedness had escaped once more. They certainly didn’t feel very lucky.

“What do you mean?” Klaus asked quietly.

“Well, let me think,” Phil said, and thought for a moment. In the background, the orphans could hear the dim sounds of Mr. Poe describing Count Olaf to somebody on the telephone. “You’re alive,” Phil said finally. “That’s lucky. And I’m sure we can think of something else.”

The three Baudelaire children looked at one another and then at Charles and Phil, the only people in Paltryville who had been kind to them. Although they would not miss the dormitory, or the terrible casseroles, or the back-breaking labor of the mill, the orphans would miss these two kind people. And as the siblings thought about whom they would miss, they thought how much they would have missed one another, if something even worse had happened to them. What if Sunny had lost the swordfight? What if Klaus had remained hypnotized forever? What if Violet had stepped into the path of the saw, instead of Dr. Orwell? The Baudelaires looked at the sunlight, pouring through the shattered window where Count Olaf had escaped, and shuddered to think of what could have happened. Being alive had never seemed lucky before, but as the children considered their terrible time in Sir’s care, they were amazed at how many lucky things had actually happened to them.

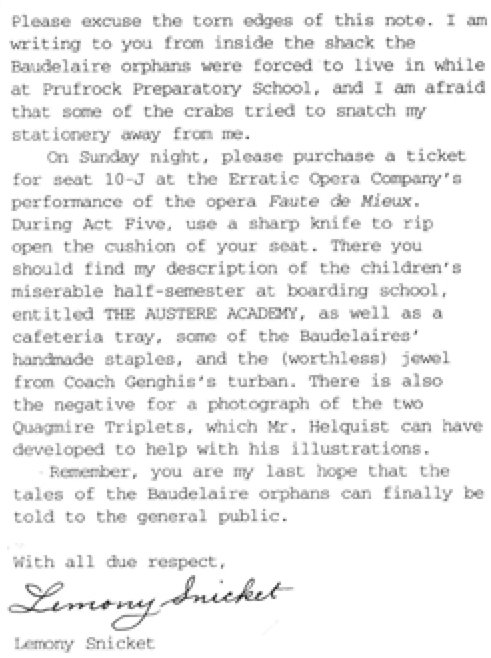
“It *was* lucky,” Violet admitted quietly, “that Klaus invented something so quickly, even though he’s not an inventor.”

“It *was* lucky,” Klaus admitted quietly, “that Violet figured out how to end my hypnosis, even though she’s not a researcher.”

“Croif,” Sunny admitted quietly, which meant something like “It *was* lucky that I could defend us from Dr. Orwell’s sword, if I do say so myself.”

The children sighed, and gave each other small, hopeful smiles. Count Olaf was on the loose, and would try again to snatch their fortune, but he had not succeeded this time. They were alive, and as they stood together at the broken window, it seemed that the last word on their situation might be “lucky,” the word that had caused so much trouble to begin with. The Baudelaire orphans were alive, and it seemed that maybe they had an inordinate amount of luck after all.

To My Kind Editor,



Please excuse the torn edges of this note. I am writing to you from inside the shack the Baudelaire orphans were forced to live in while at Prufrock Preparatory School, and I am afraid that some of the crabs tried to snatch my stationery away from me.

On Sunday night, please purchase a ticket for seat 10-J at the Erratic Opera Company's performance of the opera *Faute de Mieux*. During Act Five, use a sharp knife to rip open the cushion of your seat. There you should find my description of the children's miserable half-semester at boarding school, entitled THE AUSTERE ACADEMY, as well as a cafeteria tray, some of the Baudelaires' handmade staples, and the (worthless) jewel from Coach Genghis's turban. There is also the negative for a photograph of the two Quagmire Triplets, which Mr. Helquist can have developed to help with his illustrations.

Remember, you are my last hope that the tales of the Baudelaire orphans can finally be told to the general public.

With all due respect,

Lemony Snicket

Lemony Snicket

A Series of Unfortunate Events

THE BAD BEGINNING

THE REPTILE ROOM

THE WIDE WINDOW

THE MISERABLE MILL

THE AUSTERE ACADEMY

THE ERSATZ ELEVATOR

THE VILE VILLAGE

THE HOSTILE HOSPITAL

THE CARNIVOROUS CARNIVAL

THE SLIPPERY SLOPE

THE GRIM GROTTO

THE PENULTIMATE PERIL

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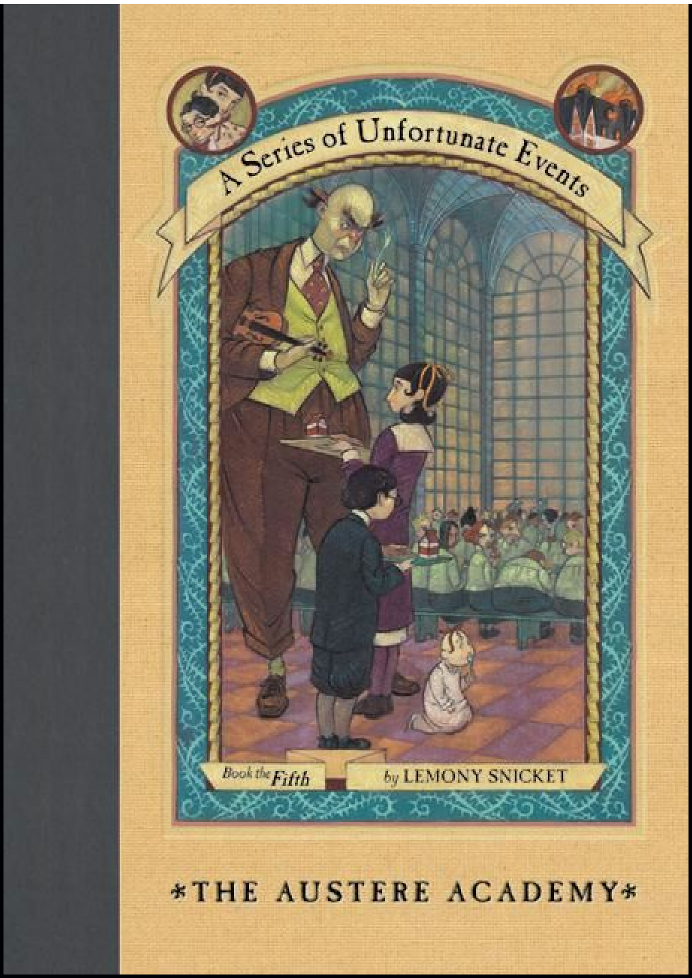
A Series of Unfortunate Events #5: The Austere Academy


A Series of Unfortunate Events
Book the Fifth
by LEMONY SNICKET
THE AUSTERE ACADEMY

A Series of Unfortunate Events

BOOK the Fifth

THE AUSTERE ACADEMY

***by* LEMONY SNICKET**

***Illustrations by* Brett Helquist**

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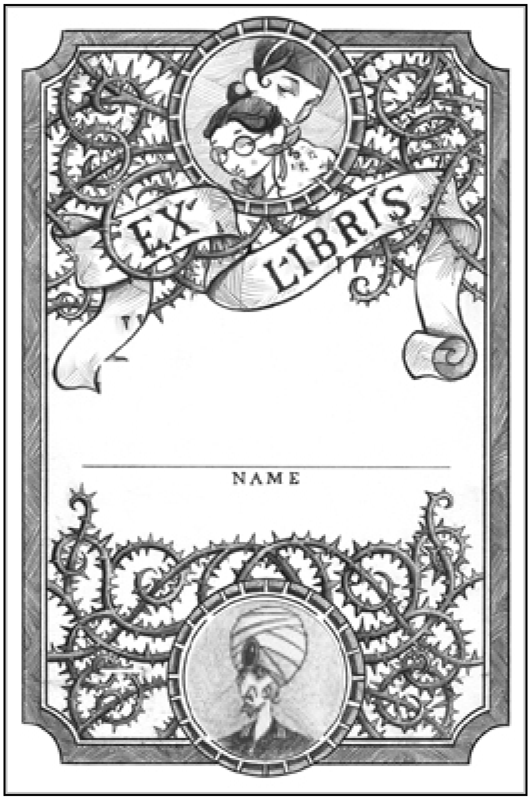
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NAME

Dear Reader,

If you are looking for a story about cheerful youngsters spending a jolly time at boarding school, look elsewhere. Violet, Klaus, and Sunny Baudelaire are intelligent and resourceful children, and you might expect that they would do very well at school. Don�t. For the Baudelaires, school turns out to be another miserable episode in their unlucky lives.

Truth be told, within the chapters that make up this dreadful story, the children will face snapping crabs, strict punishments, dripping fungus, comprehensive exams, violin recitals, S.O.R.E., and the metric system.

It is my solemn duty to stay up all night researching and writing the history of these three hapless youngsters, but you may be more comfortable getting a good night�s sleep. In that case, you should probably choose some other book.

With all due respect,

Lemony Snicket

Lemony Snicket

A Series of Unfortunate Events
LEMONY SNICKET

For Beatrice—

You will always be in my heart,

in my mind,

and in your grave.

CHAPTER
One

If you were going to give a gold medal to the least delightful person on Earth, you would have to give that medal to a person named Carmelita Spats, and if you didn't give it to her, Carmelita Spats was the sort of person who would snatch it from your hands anyway. Carmelita Spats was rude, she was violent, and she was filthy, and it is really a shame that I must describe her to you, because there are enough ghastly and distressing things in this story without even mentioning such an unpleasant person.

It is the Baudelaire orphans, thank goodness, who are the heroes of this story, not the dreadful Carmelita Spats, and if you wanted to give a gold medal to Violet, Klaus, and Sunny Baudelaire, it would be for survival in the face of adversity. Adversity is a word which here means "trouble," and there are very few people in this world who have had the sort of troubling adversity that follows these three children wherever they go. Their trouble began one day when they were relaxing at the beach and received the distressing news that their parents had been killed in a terrible fire, and so were sent to live with a distant relative named Count Olaf.

If you were going to give a gold medal to Count Olaf, you would have to lock it up some-place before the awarding ceremony, because Count Olaf was such a greedy and evil man that he would try to steal it beforehand. The Baudelaire orphans did not have a gold medal, but they did have an enormous fortune that their parents had left them, and it was that fortune

Count Olaf tried to snatch. The three siblings survived living with Count Olaf, but just barely, and since then Olaf had followed them everywhere, usually accompanied by one or more of his sinister and ugly associates. No matter who was caring for the Baudelaires, Count Olaf was always right behind them, performing such dastardly deeds that I can scarcely list them all: kidnapping, murder, nasty phone calls, disguises, poison, hypnosis, and atrocious cooking are just some of the adversities the Baudelaire orphans survived at his hands. Even worse, Count Olaf had a bad habit of avoiding capture, so he was always sure to turn up again. It is truly awful that this keeps happening, but that is how the story goes.

I only tell you that the story goes this way because you are about to become acquainted with rude, violent, filthy Carmelita Spats, and if you can't stand reading about her, you had best put this book down and read something else, because it only gets worse from here. Before too long, Violet, Klaus, and Sunny Baudelaire will have so much adversity that being shoved aside by Carmelita Spats will look like a trip to the ice cream store.

"Get out of my way, you cakesniffers!" said a rude, violent, and filthy little girl, shoving the Baudelaire orphans aside as she dashed by. Violet, Klaus, and Sunny were too startled to answer. They were standing on a sidewalk made of bricks, which must have been very old because there was a great deal of dark moss oozing out from in between them. Surrounding the sidewalk was a vast brown lawn that looked like it had never been watered, and on the lawn were hundreds of children running in various directions. Occasionally someone would slip and fall to the ground, only to get back up and keep running. It looked exhausting and pointless, two things that should be avoided at all costs, but the Baudelaire orphans barely glanced at the other children, keeping their eyes on the mossy bricks below them.

Shyness is a curious thing, because, like quicksand, it can strike people at any time, and also, like quicksand, it usually makes its victims look down. This was to be the Baudelaires' first day at Prufrock Preparatory School, and all three siblings found that they would rather look at the oozing moss than at anything else.

“Have you dropped something?” Mr. Poe asked, coughing into a white handkerchief. One place the Baudelaires certainly didn’t want to look was at Mr. Poe, who was walking closely behind them. Mr. Poe was a banker who had been placed in charge of the Baudelaires’ affairs following the terrible fire, and this had turned out to be a lousy idea. Mr. Poe meant well, but a jar of mustard probably also means well and would do a better job of keeping the Baudelaires out of danger. Violet, Klaus, and Sunny had long ago learned that the only thing they could count on from Mr. Poe was that he was always coughing.

“No,” Violet replied, “we haven’t dropped anything.” Violet was the oldest Baudelaire, and usually she was not shy at all. Violet liked to invent things, and one could often find her thinking hard about her latest invention, with her hair tied up in a ribbon to keep it out of her eyes. When her inventions were done, she liked to show them to people she knew, who were usually very impressed with her skill. Right now, as she looked down at the mossy bricks, she thought of a machine she could build that could keep moss from growing on the sidewalk, but she felt too nervous to talk about it. What if none of the teachers, children, or administrative staff were interested in her inventions?

As if he were reading her thoughts, Klaus put a hand on Violet’s shoulder, and she smiled at him. Klaus had known for all twelve of his years that his older sister found a hand on her shoulder comforting—as long as the hand was attached to an arm, of course. Normally Klaus would have said something comforting as well, but he was feeling as shy as his sister. Most of the time, Klaus could be found doing what he liked to do best, which was reading. Some mornings one could find him in bed with his glasses on because he had been reading so late that he was too tired to take them off. Klaus looked down at the sidewalk and remembered a book he had read called *Moss Mysteries*, but he felt too shy to bring it up. What if Prufrock Preparatory School had nothing good to read?

Sunny, the youngest Baudelaire, looked up at her siblings, and Violet smiled and picked her up. This was easy to do because Sunny was a baby and only a little bit larger than a loaf of bread. Sunny was also too nervous to say anything, although it was often difficult to understand what she said when she did speak up. For instance, if Sunny had not been feeling so shy, she might have opened her mouth, revealing her four sharp teeth, and said “Marimo!” which may have meant “I hope there are plenty of things to bite at school, because biting things is one of my favorite things to do!”

“I know why you’re all so quiet,” Mr. Poe said. “It’s because you’re excited, and I don’t blame you. I always wanted to go to boarding school when I was younger, but I never had the chance. I’m a little jealous of you, if you want to know the truth.”

The Baudelaires looked at one another. The fact that Prufrock Preparatory School was a boarding school was the part that made them feel the most nervous. If no one was interested in inventions, or there was nothing to read, or biting wasn’t allowed, they were stuck there, not only all day but all night as well. The siblings wished that if Mr. Poe were really jealous of them he would attend Prufrock Preparatory School himself, and they could work at the bank.

“You’re very lucky to be here,” Mr. Poe continued. “I had to call more than four schools before I found one that could take all three of you at such short notice. Prufrock Prep—that’s what they call it, as a sort of nickname—is a very fine academy. The teachers all have advanced degrees. The dormitory rooms are all finely furnished. And most important of all, there is an advanced computer system which will keep Count Olaf away from you. Vice Principal Nero told me that Count Olaf’s complete description—everything from his one long eyebrow to the tattoo of an eye on his left ankle—has been programmed into the computer, so you three should be safe here for the next several years.”

“But how can a computer keep Count Olaf away?” Violet asked in a puzzled voice, still looking down at the ground.

“It’s an *advanced* computer,” Mr. Poe said, as if the word “advanced” were a proper explanation instead of a word meaning “having attained advancement.” “Don’t worry your little heads about Count Olaf. Vice Principal Nero has promised me that he will keep a close eye on you. After all, a school as *advanced* as Prufrock Prep wouldn’t allow people to simply run around loose.”

“Move, cakesniffers!” the rude, violent, and filthy little girl said as she dashed by them again.

“What does ‘cakesniffers’ mean?” Violet murmured to Klaus, who had an enormous vocabulary from all his reading.

“I don’t know,” Klaus admitted, “but it doesn’t sound very nice.”

“What a charming word that is,” Mr. Poe said. “*Cakesniffers*. I don’t know what it means, but it reminds me of pastry. Oh well, here we are.” They had come to the end of the mossy brick sidewalk and stood in front of the school. The Baudelaires looked up at their new home and gasped in surprise. Had they not been staring at the sidewalk the whole way across the lawn, they would have seen what the academy looked like, but perhaps it was best to delay looking at it for as long as possible. A person who designs buildings is called an architect, but in the case of Prufrock Prep a better term might be “depressed architect.” The school was made up of several buildings, all made of smooth gray stone, and the buildings were grouped together in a sort of sloppy line. To get to the buildings, the Baudelaires had to walk beneath an immense stone arch casting a curved shadow on the lawn, like a rainbow in which all of the colors were gray or black. On the arch were the words “PRUFROCK PREPARATORY SCHOOL” in enormous black letters, and then, in smaller letters, the motto of the school, “Memento Mori.” But it was not the buildings or the arch that made the children gasp. It was how the buildings were shaped—rectangular, but with a rounded top. A rectangle with a rounded top is a strange shape, and the orphans could only think of one thing with that shape. To the Baudelaires each building looked exactly like a gravestone.

“Rather odd architecture,” Mr. Poe commented. “Each building looks like a thumb. In any case, you are to report to Vice Principal Nero’s office immediately. It’s on the ninth floor of the main building.”

“Aren’t you coming with us, Mr. Poe?” Violet asked. Violet was fourteen, and she knew that fourteen was old enough to go to somebody’s office by herself, but she felt nervous about walking into such a sinister-looking building without an adult nearby.

Mr. Poe coughed into his handkerchief and looked at his wristwatch at the same time. “I’m afraid not,” he said when his coughing passed. “The banking day has already begun. But I’ve talked over everything with Vice Principal Nero, and if there’s any problem, remember you can always contact me or any of my associates at Mulctuary Money Management. Now, off you go. Have a wonderful time at Prufrock Prep.”

“I’m sure we will,” said Violet, sounding much braver than she felt. “Thank you for everything, Mr. Poe.”

“Yes, thank you,” Klaus said, shaking the banker’s hand.

“Terfunt,” Sunny said, which was her way of saying “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome, all of you,” Mr. Poe said. “So long.” He nodded at all three Baudelaires, and Violet and Sunny watched him walk back down the mossy sidewalk, carefully avoiding the running children. But Klaus didn’t watch him. Klaus was looking at the enormous arch over the academy.

“Maybe I don’t know what ‘cakesniffer’ means,” Klaus said, “but I think I can translate our new school’s motto.”

“It doesn’t even look like it’s in English,” Violet said, peering up at it.

“Racho,” Sunny agreed.

“It’s not,” Klaus said. “It’s in Latin. Many mottoes are in Latin, for some reason. I don’t know very much Latin, but I do remember reading this phrase in a book about the Middle Ages. If it means what I think it means, it’s certainly a strange motto.”

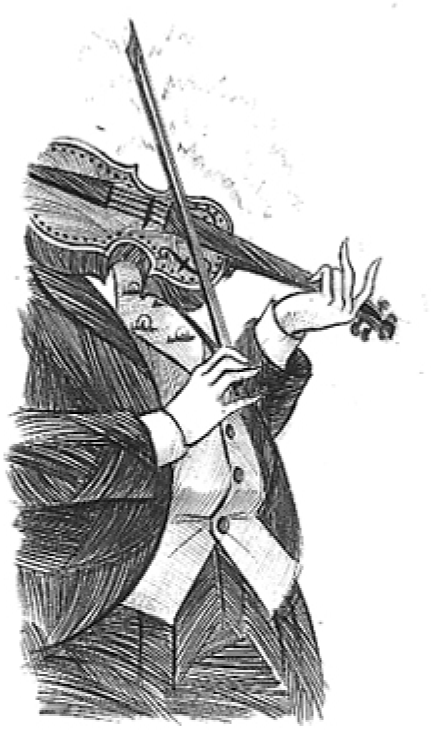
“What do you think it means?” Violet asked.

“If I’m not mistaken,” said Klaus, who was rarely mistaken, “‘Memento Mori’ means ‘Remember you will die.’”

“Remember you will die,” Violet repeated quietly, and the three siblings stepped closer to one another, as if they were very cold. Everybody will die, of course, sooner or later. Circus performers will die, and clarinet experts will die, and you and I will die, and there might be a person who lives on your block, right now, who is not looking both ways before he crosses the street and who will die in just a few seconds, all because of a bus. Everybody will die, but very few people want to be reminded of that fact. The children certainly did not want to remember that they would die, particularly as they walked beneath the arch over Prufrock Prep. The Baudelaire orphans did not need to be reminded of this as they began their first day in the giant graveyard that was now their home.

CHAPTER
Two

As the Baudelaire orphans stood outside Vice Principal Nero's door, they were reminded of something their father said to them just a few months before he died. One evening, the Baudelaire parents had gone out to hear an orchestra play, and the three children had stayed by themselves in the family mansion. The Baudelaires had something of a routine on nights like this. First, Violet and Klaus would play a few games of checkers while Sunny ripped up some old newspapers, and then the three children would read in the library until they fell asleep on comfortable sofas. When their parents came home they would wake up the sleeping children, talk to them a little about the evening, and send them off to bed. But on this particular night, the Baudelaire parents came home early and the children were still up reading—or, in Sunny's case, looking at the pictures. The siblings' father stood in the doorway of the library and said something they never forgot. "Children," he said, "there is no worse sound in the world than somebody who cannot play the violin who insists on doing so anyway."



At the time, the Baudelaires had merely giggled, but as they listened outside the vice principal’s door, they realized that their father had been absolutely right. When they first approached the heavy wooden door, it sounded like a small animal was having a temper tantrum. But as they listened more closely, the children realized it was somebody who cannot play the violin insisting on doing so anyway. The sounds shrieked and hissed and scratched and moaned and made other horrible sounds that are really impossible to describe, and finally Violet could take it no longer and knocked on the door. She had to knock very hard and at length, in order to be heard over the atrocious violin recital going on inside, but at last the wooden door opened with a creak and there stood a tall man with a violin under his chin and an angry glare in his eyes.

“Who dares interrupt a genius when he is rehearsing?” he asked, in a voice so loud and booming that it was enough to make anyone shy all over again.

“The Baudelaires,” Klaus said quietly, looking at the floor. “Mr. Poe said to come right to Vice Principal Nero’s office.”

“*Mr. Poe said to come right to Vice Principal Nero’s office*,” the man mimicked in a high, shrieky voice. “Well, come in, come in, I don’t have all afternoon.”

The children stepped into the office and got a better look at the man who had mocked them. He was dressed in a rumpled brown suit that had something sticky on its jacket, and he was wearing a tie decorated with pictures of snails. His nose was very small and very red, as if somebody had stuck a cherry tomato in the middle of his splotchy face. He was almost completely bald, but he had four tufts of hair, which he had tied into little pigtails with some old rubber bands. The Baudelaires had never seen anybody who looked like him before and they weren’t particularly interested in looking at him any further, but his office was so small and bare that it was difficult to look at anything else. There was a small metal desk with a small metal chair behind it and a small metal lamp to one side. The office had one window, decorated with curtains that matched the man’s tie. The only other object in the room was a shiny computer, which sat in a corner of the room like a toad. The computer had a blank gray screen and several buttons as red as the pigtailed man’s nose.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” the man announced in a loud voice, “Vice Principal Nero!”

There was a pause, and the three children looked all around the tiny room, wondering where Nero had been hiding all this time. Then they looked back at the man with the pigtails, who was holding both hands up in the air, his violin and bow almost touching the ceiling, and they realized that the man he had just introduced so grandly was himself. Nero paused for a moment and looked down at the Baudelaires.

“It is traditional,” he said sternly, “to applaud when a genius has been introduced.”

Just because something is traditional is no reason to do it, of course. Piracy, for example, is a tradition that has been carried on for hundreds of years, but that doesn’t mean we should all attack ships and steal their gold. But Vice Principal Nero looked so ferocious that the children felt this was a time to honor tradition, so they began clapping their hands and didn’t stop until Nero took several bows and sat down in his chair.

“Thank you very much, and welcome to Prufrock Preparatory School, *blah blah blah*,” he said, using the word “blah” to mean that he was too bored to finish his sentence properly. “I’m certainly doing Mr. Poe a favor in taking on three orphans at such short notice. He assured me that you won’t cause any trouble, but I did a little research of my own. You’ve been sent to legal guardian after legal guardian, and adversity has always followed. ‘Adversity’ means ‘trouble,’ by the way.”

“In our case,” Klaus said, not pointing out that he already knew what the word “adversity” meant, “‘adversity’ means *Count Olaf*. He was the cause of all the trouble with our guardians.”

“*He was the cause of all the trouble with our guardians*,” Nero said in his nasty, mimicking way. “I’m not interested in your problems, quite frankly. I am a genius and have no time for anything other than playing the violin. It’s depressing enough that I had to take this job as vice principal because not a single orchestra appreciates my genius. I’m not going to depress myself further by listening to the problems of three bratty children. Anyway, here at Prufrock Prep there’ll be no blaming your own weaknesses on this Count Olaf person. Look at this.”

Vice Principal Nero walked over to the computer and pressed two buttons over and over again. The screen lit up with a light green glow, as if it were seasick. “This is an advanced computer,” Nero said. “Mr. Poe gave me all the necessary information about the man you call Count Olaf, and I programmed it into the computer. See?” Nero pressed another button, and a small picture of Count Olaf appeared on the computer screen. “Now that the advanced computer knows about him, you don’t have to worry.”

“But how can a computer keep Count Olaf away?” Klaus asked. “He could still show up and cause trouble, no matter what appears on a computer screen.”

“I shouldn’t have bothered trying to explain this to you,” Vice Principal Nero said. “There’s no way uneducated people like yourself can understand a genius like me. Well, Prufrock Prep will take care of that. You'll get an education here if we have to break both your arms to do it. Speaking of which, I'd better show you around. Come here to the window."

The Baudelaire orphans walked to the window and looked down at the brown lawn. From the ninth floor, all the children running around looked like tiny ants, and the sidewalk looked like a ribbon somebody had thrown away. Nero stood behind the siblings and pointed at things with his violin.

"Now, this building you're in is the administrative building. It is completely off-limits to students. Today is your first day, so I'll forgive you, but if I see you here again, you will not be allowed to use silverware at any of your meals. That gray building over there contains the classrooms. Violet, you will be studying with Mr. Remora in Room One, and Klaus, you will be studying with Mrs. Bass in Room Two. Can you remember that, Room One and Room Two? If you don't think you can remember, I have a felt-tipped marker, and I will write 'Room One' and 'Room Two' on your hands in permanent ink."

"We can remember," Violet said quickly. "But which classroom is Sunny's?"

Vice Principal Nero drew himself up to his full height, which in his case was five feet, ten inches. "Prufrock Preparatory School is a serious academy, not a nursery school. I told Mr. Poe that we would have room for the baby here, but we do not have a classroom for her. Sunny will be employed as my secretary."

"Aregg?" Sunny asked incredulously. "Incredulously" is a word which here means "not being able to believe it," and "Aregg" is a word which here means "What? I can't believe it."

"But Sunny's a *baby*," Klaus said. "Babies aren't supposed to have jobs."

"*Babies aren't supposed to have jobs*," Nero mimicked again, and then continued. "Well, babies aren't supposed to be at boarding schools, either," Nero pointed out. "Nobody can teach a baby anything, so she'll work for me. All she has to do is answer the phone and take care of paperwork. It’s not very difficult, and it’s an honor to work for a genius, of course. Now, if either of you are late for class, or Sunny is late for work, your hands will be tied behind your back during meals. You’ll have to lean down and eat your food like a dog. Of course, Sunny will always have her silverware taken away, because she will work in the administrative building, where she’s not allowed.”

“That’s not fair!” Violet cried.

“*That’s not fair*!” the vice principal squealed back at her. “The stone building over there contains the cafeteria. Meals are served promptly at breakfast time, lunchtime, and dinnertime. If you’re late we take away your cups and glasses, and your beverages will be served to you in large puddles. That rectangular building over there, with the rounded top, is the auditorium. Every night I give a violin recital for six hours, and attendance is mandatory. The word ‘mandatory’ means that if you don’t show up, you have to buy me a large bag of candy and watch me eat it. The lawn serves as our sports facility. Our regular gym teacher, Miss Tench, accidentally fell out of a third-story window a few days ago, but we have a replacement, who should arrive shortly. In the meantime, I’ve instructed the children just to run around as fast as they can during gym time. I think that just about covers everything. Are there any questions?”

“Could anything be worse than this?” was the question Sunny had, but she was too well mannered to ask this. “Are you kidding about all these incredibly cruel punishments and rules?” was the question Klaus thought of, but he already knew that the answer was no. Only Violet thought of a question that seemed useful to ask.

“I have a question, Vice Principal Nero,” she said. “Where do we live?”

Nero’s response was so predictable that the Baudelaire orphans could have said it along with this miserable administrator. “*Where do we live*?” he said in his high, mocking tone, but when he was done making fun of the children he decided to answer it. “We have a magnificent dormitory here at Prufrock Prep,” he said. “You can’t miss it. It’s a gray building, entirely made of stone and shaped like a big toe. Inside is a huge living room with a brick fireplace, a game room, and a large lending library. Every student has his or her own room, with a bowl of fresh fruit placed there every Wednesday. Doesn't that sound nice?"

"Yes, it does," Klaus admitted.

"Keeb!" Sunny shrieked, which meant something along the lines of "I like fruit!"

"I'm glad you think so," Nero said, "although you won't get to see much of the place. In order to live in the dormitory, you must have a permission slip with the signature of a parent or guardian. Your parents are dead, and Mr. Poe tells me that your guardians have either been killed or have fired you."

"But surely Mr. Poe can sign our permission slip," Violet said.

"He surely can *not*," Nero replied. "He is neither your parent nor your guardian. He is a banker who is in charge of your affairs."

"But that's more or less the same thing," Klaus protested.

"*That's more or less the same thing*," Nero mimicked. "Perhaps after a few semesters at Prufrock Prep, you'll learn the difference between a parent and a banker. No, I'm afraid you'll have to live in a small shack, made entirely of tin. Inside there is no living room, no game room, and no lending library whatsoever. You three will each have your own bale of hay to sleep on, but no fruit. It's a dismal place, but Mr. Poe tells me that you've had a number of uncomfortable experiences, so I figured you'd be used to such things."

"Couldn't you please make an exception?" Violet asked.

"I'm a *violinist*!" Nero cried. "I have no time to make exceptions! I'm too busy practicing the violin. So if you will kindly leave my office, I can get back to work."

Klaus opened his mouth to say something more, but when he looked at Nero, he knew that there was no use saying another word to such a stubborn man, and he glumly followed his sisters out of the vice principal's office. When the office door shut behind them, however, Vice Principal Nero said another word, and he said it three times. The three children listened to these three words that he said and knew for certain that he had not been sorry at all. For as soon as the Baudelaires left the office and Nero thought he was alone, he said to himself, "Hee hee hee."

Now, the vice principal of Prufrock Preparatory School did not actually say the syllables "hee hee hee," of course. Whenever you see the words "hee hee hee" in a book, or "ha ha ha," or "har har har," or "heh heh heh," or even "ho ho ho," those words mean somebody was laughing. In this case, however, the words "hee hee hee" cannot really describe what Vice Principal Nero's laugh sounded like. The laugh was squeaky, and it was wheezy, and it had a rough, crackly edge to it, as if Nero were eating tin cans as he laughed at the children. But most of all, the laugh sounded *cruel*. It is always cruel to laugh at people, of course, although sometimes if they are wearing an ugly hat it is hard to control yourself. But the Baudelaires were not wearing ugly hats. They were young children receiving bad news, and if Vice Principal Nero really had to laugh at them, he should have been able to control himself until the siblings were out of earshot. But Nero didn't care about controlling himself, and as the Baudelaire orphans listened to the laugh, they realized that what their father had said to them that night when he'd come home from the symphony was wrong. There *was* a worse sound in the world than somebody who cannot play the violin insisting on doing so anyway. The sound of an administrator laughing a squeaky, wheezy, rough, crackly, cruel laugh at children who have to live in a shack was much, much worse. So as I hide out here in this mountain cabin and write the words "hee hee hee," and you, wherever you are hiding out, read the words "hee hee hee," you should know that "hee hee hee" stands for the worst sound the Baudelaires had ever heard.

CHAPTER
Three

The expression “Making a mountain out of a molehill” simply means making a big deal out of something that is actually a small deal, and it is easy to see how this expression came about. Molehills are simply mounds of earth serving as condominiums for moles, and they have never caused anyone any harm except for maybe a stubbed toe if you were walking through the wilderness without any shoes on. Mountains, however, are very large mounds of earth and are constantly causing problems. They are very tall, and when people try to climb them they often fall off, or get lost and die of starvation. Sometimes two countries fight over who really owns a mountain, and thousands of people have to go to war and come home grumpy or wounded. And, of course, mountains serve as homes to mountain goats and mountain lions, who enjoy attacking helpless picnickers and eating sandwiches or children. So when someone is making a mountain out of a molehill, they are pretending that something is as horrible as a war or a ruined picnic when it is really only as horrible as a stubbed toe.

When the Baudelaire orphans reached the shack where they were going to live, however, they realized that Vice Principal Nero hadn’t been making a mountain out of a molehill at all when he had said that the shack was a dismal place. If anything, he had been making a molehill out of a mountain. It was true that the shack was tiny, as Nero had said, and made of tin, and it was true that there was no living room, no game room, and no lending library. It was true that there were three bales of hay instead of beds, and that there was absolutely no fresh fruit in sight. But Vice Principal Nero had left out a few details in his description, and it was these details that made the shack even worse. The first detail the Baudelaires noticed was that the shack was infested with small crabs, each one about the size of a matchbox, scurrying around the wooden floor with their tiny claws snapping in the air. As the children walked across the shack to sit glumly on one of the bales of hay, they were disappointed to learn that the crabs were territorial, a word which here means “unhappy to see small children in their living quarters.” The crabs gathered around the children and began snapping their claws at them. Luckily, the crabs did not have very good aim, and luckily, their claws were so small that they probably wouldn’t hurt any more than a good strong pinch, but even if they were more or less harmless they did not make for a good shack.

When the children reached the bale of hay and sat down, tucking their legs up under them to avoid the snapping crabs, they looked up at the ceiling and saw another detail Nero had neglected to mention. Some sort of fungus was growing on the ceiling, a fungus that was light tan and quite damp. Every few seconds, small drops of moisture would fall from the fungus with a *plop*! and the children had to duck to avoid getting light tan fungus juice on them. Like the small crabs, the *plop!*ing fungus did not appear to be very harmful, but also like the small crabs, the fungus made the shack even more uncomfortable than the vice principal had described it.

And lastly, as the children sat on the bale of hay with their legs tucked beneath them and ducked to avoid fungus juice, they saw one more harmless but unpleasant detail of the shack that was worse than Nero had led them to believe, and that was the color of the walls. Each tin wall was bright green, with tiny pink hearts painted here and there as if the shack were an enormous, tacky Valentine’s Day card instead of a place to live, and the Baudelaires found that they would rather look at the bales of hay, or the small crabs on the floor, or even the light tan fungus on the ceiling than the ugly walls.

Overall, the shack was too miserable to serve as a storage space for old banana peels, let alone as a home for three young people, and I confess that if I had been told that it was my home I probably would have lain on the bales of hay and thrown a temper tantrum. But the Baudelaires had learned long ago that temper tantrums, however fun they may be to throw, rarely solve whatever problem is causing them. So after a long, miserable silence, the orphans tried to look at their situation in a more positive light.

“This isn’t such a nice room,” Violet said finally, “but if I put my mind to it, I bet I can invent something that can keep these crabs away from us.”

“And I’m going to read up on this light tan fungus,” Klaus said. “Maybe the dormitory library has information on how to stop it from dripping.”

“Ivoser,” Sunny said, which meant something like “I bet I can use my four sharp teeth to scrape this paint away and make the walls a bit less ugly.”

Klaus gave his baby sister a little kiss on the top of her head. “At least we get to go to school,” he pointed out. “I’ve missed being in a real classroom.”

“Me too,” Violet agreed. “And at least we’ll meet some people our own age. We’ve only had the company of adults for quite some time.”

“Wonic,” Sunny said, which probably meant “And learning secretarial skills is an exciting opportunity for me, although I should really be in nursery school instead.”

“That’s true,” Klaus said. “And who knows? Maybe the advanced computer really can keep Count Olaf away, and that’s the most important thing of all.”

“You’re right,” Violet said. “Any room that doesn’t have Count Olaf in it is good enough for me.”

“Olo,” Sunny said, which meant “Even if it’s ugly, damp, and filled with crabs.”

The children sighed and then sat quietly for a few moments. The shack was quiet, except for the snapping of tiny crab claws, the *plop*! of fungus, and the sighs of the Baudelaires as they looked at the ugly walls. Try as they might, the youngsters just couldn’t make the shack into a molehill. No matter how much they thought of real classrooms, people their own age, or the exciting opportunity of secretarial skills, their new home seemed much, much worse than even the sorest of stubbed toes.

“Well,” Klaus said after a while, “it feels like it’s about lunchtime. Remember, if we’re late they take away our cups and glasses, so we should probably get a move on.”

“Those rules are ridiculous,” Violet said, ducking to avoid a *plop*! “Lunchtime isn’t a specific time, so you can’t be late for it. It’s just a word that means ‘around lunch.’”

“I know,” Klaus said, “and the part about Sunny being punished for going to the administrative building, when she *has* to go there to be Nero’s secretary, is completely absurd.”

“Kalc!” Sunny said, putting her little hand on her brother’s knee. She meant something like “Don’t worry about it. I’m a baby, so I hardly ever use silverware. It doesn’t matter that it’ll be taken away from me.”

Ridiculous rules or not, the orphans did not want to be punished, so the three of them walked gingerly—the word “gingerly” here means “avoiding territorial crabs”—across the shack and out onto the brown lawn. Gym class must have been over, because all the running children were gone, and this only made the Baudelaires walk even more quickly to the cafeteria.

Several years before this story took place, when Violet was ten and Klaus was eight and Sunny was not even a fetus, the Baudelaire family went to a county fair in order to see a pig that their Uncle Elwyn had entered in a contest. The pig contest turned out to be a bit dull, but in the neighboring tent there was another contest that the family found quite interesting: the Biggest Lasagna Contest. The lasagna that won the blue ribbon had been baked by eleven nuns, and was as big and soft as a large mattress. Perhaps because they were at such an impressionable age—the phrase “impressionable age” here means “ten and eight years old, respectively”—Violet and Klaus always remembered this lasagna, and they were sure they would never see another one anywhere near as big.

Violet and Klaus were wrong. When the Baudelaires entered the cafeteria, they found a lasagna waiting for them that was the size of a dance floor. It was sitting on top of an enormous trivet to keep it from burning the floor, and the person serving it was wearing a thick metal mask as protection, so that the children could only see their eyes peeking out from tiny eyeholes. The stunned Baudelaires got into a long line of children and waited their turn for the metal-masked person to scoop lasagna onto ugly plastic trays and hand it wordlessly to the children. After receiving their lasagna, the orphans walked further down the line and helped themselves to green salad, which was waiting for them in a bowl the size of a pickup truck. Next to the salad was a mountain of garlic bread, and at the end of the line was another metal-masked person, handing out silverware to the students who had not been inside the administrative building.

The Baudelaires said “thank you” to the person, who gave them a slow metallic nod in return. They took a long look around the crowded cafeteria. Hundreds of children had already received their lasagna and were sitting at long rectangular tables. The Baudelaires saw several other children who had undoubtedly been in the administrative building, because they had no silverware. They saw several more students who had their hands tied behind their backs as punishment for being late to class. And they saw several students who had a sad look on their faces, as if they had been forced to buy somebody a bag of candy and watch them eat it, and the orphans guessed that these students had failed to show up to one of Nero’s six-hour concerts.

But it was none of these punishments that made the Baudelaire orphans pause for so long. It was the fact that they did not know where to sit. Cafeterias can be confusing places, because there are different rules for each one, and sometimes it is difficult to know where one should eat. Normally, the Baudelaires would simply eat with one of their friends, but their friends were far, far away from Prufrock Preparatory School, and Violet, Klaus, and Sunny gazed around the cafeteria full of strangers and thought they might never put down their ugly trays. Finally, they caught the eye of the girl they had seen on the lawn, who had called them such a strange name, and walked a few steps toward her.

Now, you and I know that this loathsome little girl was Carmelita Spats, but the Baudelaires had not been properly introduced to her and so did not realize just how loathsome she was, although as the orphans drew closer she gave them an instant education.

"Don't even *think* of eating around here, you cakesniffers!" Carmelita Spats cried, and several of her rude, filthy, violent friends nodded in agreement. "Nobody wants to have lunch with people who live in the Orphans Shack!"

"I'm terribly sorry," Klaus said, although he wasn't terribly sorry at all. "I didn't mean to disturb you."

Carmelita, who had apparently never been to the administrative building, picked up her silverware and began to bang it on her tray in a rhythmic and irritating way. "Cakesniffing orphans in the Orphans Shack! Cakesniffing orphans in the Orphans Shack!" she chanted, and to the Baudelaires' dismay, many other children joined right in. Like many other rude, violent, filthy people, Carmelita Spats had a bunch of friends who were always happy to help her torment people—probably to avoid being tormented themselves. In a few seconds, it seemed like the entire cafeteria was banging their silverware and chanting, "Cakesniffing orphans in the Orphans Shack!" The three siblings stepped closer together, craning their necks to see if there was any possible place to which they could escape and eat their lunch in peace.

“Oh, leave them alone, Carmelita!” a voice cried over the chanting. The Baudelaires turned around and saw a boy with very dark hair and very wide eyes. He looked a little older than Klaus and a little younger than Violet and had a dark green notebook tucked into the pocket of his thick wool sweater. “*You’re* the cakesniffer, and nobody in their right mind would want to eat with you anyway. Come on,” the boy said, turning to the Baudelaires. “There’s room at our table.”

“Thank you very much,” Violet said in relief and followed the boy to a table that had plenty of room. He sat down next to a girl who looked absolutely identical to the boy. She looked about the same age, and also had very dark hair, very wide eyes, and a notebook tucked into the pocket of *her* thick wool sweater. The only difference seemed to be that the girl’s notebook was pitch black. Seeing two people who look so much alike is a little bit eerie, but it was better than looking at Carmelita Spats, so the Baudelaires sat down across from them and introduced themselves.

“I’m Violet Baudelaire,” said Violet Baudelaire, “and this is my brother, Klaus, and our baby sister, Sunny.”

“It’s nice to meet you,” said the boy. “My name is Duncan Quagmire, and this is my sister, Isadora. And the girl who was yelling at you, I’m sorry to say, was Carmelita Spats.”

“She didn’t seem very nice,” Klaus said.

“That is the understatement of the century,” Isadora said. “Carmelita Spats is rude, filthy, and violent, and the less time you spend with her the happier you will be.”

“Read the Baudelaires the poem you wrote about her,” Duncan said to his sister.

“You write poetry?” Klaus asked. He had read a lot about poets but had never met one.

“Just a little bit,” Isadora said modestly. “I write poems down in this notebook. It’s an interest of mine.”

"Sappho!" Sunny shrieked, which meant something like "I'd be very pleased to hear a poem of yours!"

Klaus explained to the Quagmires what Sunny meant, and Isadora smiled and opened her notebook. "It's a very short poem," she said. "Only two rhyming lines."

"That's called a couplet," Klaus said. "I learned that from a book of literary criticism."

"Yes, I know," Isadora said, and then read her poem, leaning forward so Carmelita Spats would not overhear:

> "*I would rather eat a bowl of vampire bats than spend an hour with*
> *Carmelita Spats*."

The Baudelaires giggled and then covered their mouths so nobody would know they were laughing at Carmelita. "That was great," Klaus said. "I like the part about the bowl of bats."

"Thanks," Isadora said. "I would be interested in reading that book of literary criticism you told me about. Would you let me borrow it?"

Klaus looked down. "I can't," he said. "That book belonged to my father, and it was destroyed in a fire."

The Quagmires looked at one another, and their eyes grew even wider. "I'm very sorry to hear that," Duncan said. "My sister and I have been through a terrible fire, so we know what that's like. Did your father die in the fire?"

"Yes he did," Klaus said, "and my mother too."

Isadora put down her fork, reached across the table, and patted Klaus on the hand. Normally this might have embarrassed Klaus a little bit, but under the circumstances it felt perfectly natural. "I'm so sorry to hear that," she said. “Our parents died in a fire as well. It’s awful to miss your parents so much, isn’t it?”

“Bloni,” Sunny said, nodding.

“For a long time,” Duncan admitted, “I was afraid of any kind of fire. I didn’t even like to look at stoves.”

Violet smiled. “We stayed with a woman for a while, our Aunt Josephine, who was afraid of stoves. She was afraid that they might explode.”

“Explode!” Duncan said. “Even I wasn’t afraid as all that. Why aren’t you staying with your Aunt Josephine now?”

Now it was Violet’s turn to look down, and Duncan’s turn to reach across the table and take her hand. “She died too,” Violet said. “To tell you the truth, Duncan, our lives have been very topsy-turvy for quite some time.”

“I’m very sorry to hear it,” Duncan said, “and I wish I could tell you that things will get better here. But between Vice Principal Nero playing the violin, Carmelita Spats teasing us, and the dreadful Orphans Shack, Prufrock Prep is a pretty miserable place.”

“I think it’s awful to call it the Orphans Shack,” Klaus said. “It’s a bad enough place without giving it an insulting nickname.”

“The nickname is more of Carmelita’s handiwork, I’m sorry to say,” Isadora said. “Duncan and I had to live there for three semesters because we needed a parent or guardian to sign our permission slip, and we didn’t have one.”

“That’s the same thing that happened to us!” Violet cried. “And when we asked Nero to make an exception—”

“He said he was too busy practicing the violin,” Isadora said, nodding as she finished Violet’s sentence. “He always says that. Anyway, Carmelita called it the Orphans Shack when we were living there, and it looks like she's going to keep on doing it."

"Well," Violet sighed, "Carmelita's nasty names are the least of our problems in the shack. How did you deal with the crabs when you lived there?"

Duncan let go of her hand to take his notebook out of his pocket. "I use my notebook to take notes on things," he explained. "I plan to be a newspaper reporter when I get a little older and I figure it's good to start practicing. Here it is: notes on the crabs. They're afraid of loud noises, you see, so I have a list of things we did to scare them away from us."

"Afraid of loud noises," Violet repeated, and tied her hair up in a ribbon to keep it out of her eyes.

"When she ties her hair up like that," Klaus explained to the Quagmires, "it means she's thinking of an invention. My sister is quite an inventor."

"How about noisy shoes?" Violet said suddenly. "If we took small pieces of metal and glued them to our shoes? Then wherever we walked would make a loud noise, and I bet we'd hardly ever see those crabs."

"Noisy shoes!" Duncan cried. "Isadora and I lived in the Orphans Shack all that time and never thought of noisy shoes!" He took a pencil out of his pocket and wrote "noisy shoes" in the dark green notebook, and then turned a page. "I do have a list of fungus books that are in the school library, if you need help with that tan stuff on the ceiling."

"Zatwal!" Sunny shrieked.

"We'd love to see the library," Violet translated. "It sure is lucky that we ran into you two twins."

Duncan's and Isadora's faces fell, an expression which does not mean that the front part of their heads actually fell to the ground. It simply means that the two siblings suddenly looked very sad.

“What’s wrong?” Klaus asked. “Did we say something that upset you?”

“Twins,” Duncan said, so softly that the Baudelaires could barely hear him.

“You *are* twins, aren’t you?” Violet asked. “You look just alike.”

“We’re triplets,” Isadora said sadly.

“I’m confused,” Violet said. “Aren’t triplets *three* people born at the same time?”

“We *were* three people born at the same time,” Isadora explained, “but our brother, Quigley, died in the fire that killed our parents.”

“I’m very sorry to hear that,” Klaus said. “Please forgive our calling you twins. We meant no disrespect to Quigley’s memory.”

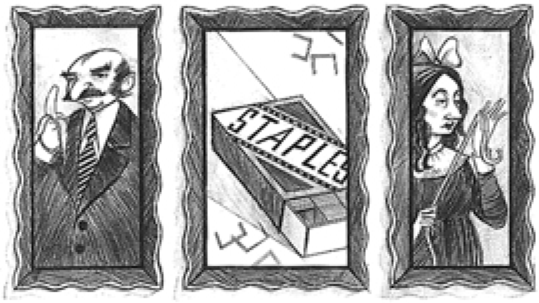
“Of course you didn’t,” Duncan said, giving the Baudelaires a small smile. “There’s no way you could have known. Come on, if you’re done with your lasagna we’ll show you the library.”

“And maybe we can find some pieces of metal,” Isadora said, “for noisy shoes.”

The Baudelaire orphans smiled, and the five of them bussed their trays and walked out of the cafeteria. The library turned out to be a very pleasant place, but it was not the comfortable chairs, the huge wooden bookshelves, or the hush of people reading that made the three siblings feel so good as they walked into the room. It is useless for me to tell you all about the brass lamps in the shapes of different fish, or the bright blue curtains that rippled like water as a breeze came in from the window, because although these were wonderful things they were not what made the three children smile. The Quagmire triplets were smiling, too, and although I have not researched the Quagmires nearly as much as I have the Baudelaires, I can say with reasonable accuracy that they were smiling for the same reason.

It is a relief, in hectic and frightening times, to find true friends, and it was this relief that all five children were feeling as the Quagmires gave the Baudelaires a tour of the Prufrock Library. Friends can make you feel that the world is smaller and less sneaky than it really is, because you know people who have similar experiences, a phrase which here means “having lost family members in terrible fires and lived in the Orphans Shack.” As Duncan and Isadora whispered to Violet, Klaus, and Sunny, explaining how the library was organized, the Baudelaire children felt less and less distressed about their new circumstances, and by the time Duncan and Isadora were recommending their favorite books, the three siblings thought that perhaps their troubles were coming to an end at last. They were wrong about this, of course, but for the moment it didn’t matter. The Baudelaire orphans had found friends, and as they stood in the library with the Quagmire triplets, the world felt smaller and safer than it had for a long, long time.

CHAPTER
Four



If you have walked into a museum recently—whether you did so to attend an art exhibition or to escape from the police—you may have noticed a type of painting known as a triptych. A triptych has three panels, with something different painted on each of the panels. For instance, my friend Professor Reed made a triptych for me, and he painted fire on one panel, a typewriter on another, and the face of a beautiful, intelligent woman on the third. The triptych is entitled *What Happened to Beatrice* and I cannot look upon it without weeping.

I am a writer, and not a painter, but if I were to try and paint a triptych entitled *The Baudelaire Orphans' Miserable Experiences at Prufrock Prep*, I would paint Mr. Remora on one panel, Mrs. Bass on another, and a box of staples on the third, and the results would make me so sad that between the Beatrice triptych and the Baudelaire triptych I would scarcely stop weeping all day.

Mr. Remora was Violet's teacher, and he was so terrible that Violet thought that she'd almost rather stay in the Orphans Shack all morning and eat her meals with her hands tied behind her back rather than hurry to Room One and learn from such a wretched man. Mr. Remora had a dark and thick mustache, as if somebody had chopped off a gorilla's thumb and stuck it above Mr. Remora's lip, and also like a gorilla, Mr. Remora was constantly eating bananas. Bananas are a fairly delicious fruit and contain a healthy amount of potassium, but after watching Mr. Remora shove banana after banana into his mouth, dropping banana peels on the floor and smearing banana pulp on his chin and in his mustache, Violet never wanted to see another banana again. In between bites of banana, Mr. Remora would tell stories, and the children would write the stories down in notebooks, and every so often there would be a test. The stories were very short, and there were a whole lot of them on every conceivable subject. "One day I went to the store to purchase a carton of milk," Mr. Remora would say, chewing on a banana. "When I got home, I poured the milk into a glass and drank it. Then I watched television. The end." Or: "One afternoon a man named Edward got into a green truck and drove to a farm. The farm had geese and cows. The end." Mr. Remora would tell story after story, and eat banana after banana, and it would get more and more difficult for Violet to pay attention. To make things better, Duncan sat next to Violet, and they would pass notes to one another on particularly boring days. But to make things worse, Carmelita Spats sat right behind Violet, and every few minutes she would lean forward and poke Violet with a stick she had found on the lawn. "Orphan," she would whisper and poke Violet with the stick, and Violet would lose her concentration and forget to write down some detail of Mr. Remora's latest story.

Across the hall in Room Two was Klaus's teacher Mrs. Bass, whose black hair was so long and messy that she also vaguely resembled a gorilla. Mrs. Bass was a poor teacher, a phrase which here does not mean "a teacher who doesn't have a lot of money" but "a teacher who is obsessed with the metric system." The metric system, you probably know, is the system by which the majority of the world measures things. Just as it is perfectly all right to eat a banana or two, it is perfectly all right to be interested in measuring things. Klaus could remember a time, when he was about eight years old, when he had measured the width of all the doorways in the Baudelaire mansion when he was bored one rainy afternoon. But rain or shine, all Mrs. Bass wanted to do was measure things and write down the measurements on the chalkboard. Each morning, she would walk into Room Two carrying a bag full of ordinary objects—a frying pan, a picture frame, the skeleton of a cat—and place an object on each student's desk.

"Measure!" Mrs. Bass would shout, and everybody would take out their rulers and measure whatever it was that their teacher had put on their desks. They would call out the measurements to Mrs. Bass, who would write them on the board and then have everybody switch objects. The class would continue on in this way for the entire morning, and Klaus would feel his eyes glaze over—the phrase "glaze over" here means "ache slightly out of boredom." Across the room, Isadora Quagmire's eyes were glazing over too, and occasionally the two of them would look at one another and stick their tongues out as if to say, *Mrs. Bass is terribly boring, isn't she*?

But Sunny, instead of going into a classroom, had to work in the administrative building, and I must say that her situation was perhaps the worst in the entire triptych. As Vice Principal Nero's secretary, Sunny had numerous duties assigned to her that were simply impossible for a baby to perform. For instance, she was in charge of answering the telephone, but people who called Vice Principal Nero did not always know that "Seltepia!" was Sunny's way of saying "Good morning, this is Vice Principal Nero's office, how may I help you?" By the second day Nero was furious at her for confusing so many of his business associates. In addition, Sunny was in charge of typing, stapling, and mailing all of Vice Principal Nero's letters, which meant she had to work a typewriter, a stapler, and stamps, all of which were designed for adult use. Unlike many babies, Sunny had some experience in hard work—after all, she and her siblings had worked for some time at the Lucky Smells Lumbermill—but this equipment was simply inappropriate for such tiny fingers. Sunny could scarcely move the typewriter's keys, and even when she could she did not know how to spell most of the words Nero dictated. She had never used a stapler before, so she sometimes stapled her fingers by mistake, which hurt quite a bit. And occasionally one of the stamps would stick to her tongue and wouldn't come off.

In most schools, no matter how miserable, the students have a chance to recuperate during the weekend, when they can rest and play instead of attending wretched classes, and the Baudelaire orphans looked forward to taking a break from looking at bananas, rulers, and secretarial supplies. So they were quite distressed one Friday when the Quagmires informed them that Prufrock Prep did not have weekends. Saturday and Sunday were regular schooldays, supposedly in keeping with the school's motto. This rule did not really make any sense—it is, after all, just as easy to remember you will die when you are relaxing as when you are in school—but that was the way things were, so the Baudelaires could never remember exactly what day it was, so repetitive was their schedule. So I am sorry to say that I cannot tell you what day it was when Sunny noticed that the staple supply was running low, but I can tell you that Nero informed her that because she had wasted so much time learning to be a secretary he would not buy any more when they ran out. Instead Sunny would have to make staples herself, out of some skinny metal rods Nero kept in a drawer.

"That's ridiculous!" Violet cried when Sunny told her of Nero's latest demand. It was after dinner, and the Baudelaire orphans were in the Orphans Shack with the Quagmire triplets, sprinkling salt at the ceiling. Violet had found some pieces of metal behind the cafeteria and had fashioned five pairs of noisy shoes: three for the Baudelaires and two for the Quagmires so the crabs wouldn't bother them when they visited the Orphans Shack. The problem of the tan fungus, however, was yet to be solved. With Duncan's help, Klaus had found a book on fungus in the library and had read that salt might make this particular fungus shrivel up. The Quagmires had distracted some of the masked cafeteria workers by dropping their trays on the ground, and while Nero yelled at them for making a mess, the Baudelaires had slipped three saltshakers into their pockets. Now, in the brief recess after dinner, the five children were sitting on bales of hay, trying to toss salt onto the fungus and talking about their day.

"It certainly is ridiculous," Klaus agreed. "It's silly enough that Sunny has to be a secretary, but making her own staples? I've never heard of anything so unfair."

"I think staples are made in factories," Duncan said, pausing to flip through his green notebook to see if he had any notes on the matter. "I don't think people have made staples by hand since the fifteenth century."

"If you could snitch some of the skinny metal rods, Sunny," Isadora said, "we could all help make the staples after dinnertime. If five of us worked together, it would be much less trouble. And speaking of trouble, I’m working on a poem about Count Olaf, but I’m not sure I know words that are terrible enough to describe him.”

“And I imagine it’s difficult to find words that rhyme with ‘Olaf,’” Violet said.

“It is difficult,” Isadora admitted. “All I can think of so far is ‘pilaf,’ which is a kind of rice dish. And that’s more a half-rhyme, anyway.”

“Maybe someday you’ll be able to publish your poem about Count Olaf,” Klaus said, “and everyone will know how horrible he is.”

“And I’ll write a newspaper article all about him,” Duncan volunteered.

“I think I could build a printing press myself,” Violet said. “Maybe when I come of age, I can use some of the Baudelaire fortune to buy the materials I would need.”

“Could we print books, too?” Klaus asked.

Violet smiled. She knew her brother was thinking of a whole library they could print for themselves. “Books, too,” she said.

“The Baudelaire fortune?” Duncan asked. “Did your parents leave behind a fortune, too? Our parents owned the famous Quagmire sapphires, which were unharmed in the fire. When we come of age, those precious jewels will belong to us. We could start our printing business together.”

“That’s a wonderful idea!” Violet cried. “We could call it Quagmire-Baudelaire Incorporated.”

“*We could call it Quagmire-Baudelaire Incorporated*!” The children were so surprised to hear the sneering voice of Vice Principal Nero that they dropped their saltshakers on the ground. Instantly, the tiny crabs in the Orphans Shack picked them up and scurried away with them before Nero could notice. “I’m sorry to interrupt you in the middle of your important business meeting,” he said, although the youngsters could see that the vice principal wasn’t sorry one bit. “The new gym teacher has arrived, and he was interested in meeting our orphan population before my concert began. Apparently orphans have excellent bone structure or something. Isn't that what you said, Coach Genghis?"

"Oh yes," said a tall, skinny man, who stepped forward to reveal himself to the children. The man was wearing sweatpants and a sweatshirt, such as any gym teacher might wear. On his feet were some expensive-looking running shoes with very high tops, and around his neck was a shiny silver whistle. Wrapped around the top of his head was a length of cloth secured in place with a shiny red jewel. Such things are called turbans and are worn by some people for religious reasons, but Violet, Klaus, and Sunny took one look at this man and knew that he was wearing a turbans for an entirely different reason.

"Oh yes," the man said again. "All orphans have perfect legs for running, and I couldn't wait to see what specimens were waiting for me here in the shack."

"Children," Nero said, "get up off of your hay and say hello to Coach Genghis."

"Hello, Coach Genghis," Duncan said.

"Hello, Coach Genghis," Isadora said.

The Quagmire triplets each shook Coach Genghis's bony hand and then turned and gave the Baudelaires a confused look. They were clearly surprised to see the three siblings still sitting on the hay and staring up at Coach Genghis rather than obeying Nero's orders. But had I been there in the Orphans Shack, I most certainly would not have been surprised, and I would bet *What Happened to Beatrice*, my prized triptych, that had you been there you would not have been surprised, either. Because you have probably guessed, as the Baudelaires guessed, why the man who was calling himself Coach Genghis was wearing a turban. A turban covers people's hair, which can alter their appearance quite a bit, and if the turban is arranged so that it hangs down rather low, as this one did, the folds of cloth can even cover the eyebrows—or in this case, eye*brow*—of the person wearing it. But it cannot cover someone's shiny, shiny eyes, or the greedy and sinister look that somebody might have in their eyes when the person looks down at three relatively helpless children.

What the man who called himself Coach Genghis had said about all orphans having perfect legs for running was utter nonsense, of course, but as the Baudelaires looked up at their new gym teacher, they wished that it weren’t nonsense. As the man who called himself Coach Genghis looked back at them with his shiny, shiny eyes, the Baudelaire orphans wished more than anything that their legs could carry them far, far away from the man who was really Count Olaf.

CHAPTER
Five

The expression “following suit” is a curious one, because it has nothing to do with walking behind a matching set of clothing. If you follow suit, it means you do the same thing somebody else has just done. If all of your friends decided to jump off a bridge into the icy waters of an ocean or river, for instance, and you jumped in right after them, you would be following suit. You can see why following suit can be a dangerous thing to do, because you could end up drowning simply because somebody else thought of it first.

This is why, when Violet stood up from the hay and said, “How do you do, Coach Genghis?” Klaus and Sunny were reluctant to follow suit. It was inconceivable to the younger Baudelaires that their sister had not recognized Count Olaf, and that she hadn’t leaped to her feet and informed Vice Principal Nero what was going on. For a moment, Klaus and Sunny even considered that Violet had been hypnotized, as Klaus had been back when the Baudelaire orphans were living in Paltryville. But Violet’s eyes did not look any wider than they did normally, nor did she say “How do you do, Coach Genghis?” in the dazed tone of voice Klaus had used when he had been under hypnosis.

But although they were puzzled, the younger Baudelaires trusted their sister absolutely. She had managed to avoid marrying Count Olaf when it had seemed like it would be inevitable, a word which here means “a lifetime of horror and woe.” She had made a lockpick when they’d needed one in a hurry, and had used her inventing skills to help them escape from some very hungry leeches. So even though they could not think what the reason was, Klaus and Sunny knew that Violet must have had a good reason to greet Count Olaf politely rather than reveal him instantly, and so, after a pause, they followed suit.

“How do you do, Coach Genghis?” Klaus said.

“Gefidio!” Sunny shrieked.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you,” Coach Genghis said, and smirked. The Baudelaires could tell he thought he had fooled them completely and was very pleased with himself.

“What do you think, Coach Genghis?” Vice Principal Nero asked. “Do any of these orphans have the legs you’re looking for?”

Coach Genghis scratched his turban and looked down at the children as if they were an all-you-can-eat salad bar instead of five orphans. “Oh yes,” he said in the wheezy voice the Baudelaires still heard in their nightmares. With his bony hands, he pointed first at Violet, then at Klaus, and lastly at Sunny. “These three children here are just what I’m looking for, all right. I have no use for these twins, however.”

“Neither do I,” Nero said, not bothering to point out that the Quagmires were triplets. He then looked at his watch. “Well, it’s time for my concert. Follow me to the auditorium, all of you, unless you are in the mood to buy me a bag of candy.”

The Baudelaire orphans hoped never to buy their vice principal a gift of any sort, let alone a bag of candy, which the children loved and hadn’t eaten in a very long time, so they followed Nero out of the Orphans Shack and across the lawn to the auditorium. The Quagmires followed suit, staring up at the gravestone buildings, which looked even spookier in the moonlight.

“This evening,” Nero said, “I will be playing a violin sonata I wrote myself. It only lasts about a half hour, but I will play it twelve times in a row.”

“Oh, good,” Coach Genghis said. “If I may say so, Vice Principal Nero, I am an enormous fan of your music. Your concerts were one of the main reasons I wanted to work here at Prufrock Prep."

"Well, it's good to hear that," Nero said. "It's difficult to find people who appreciate me as the genius I am."

"I know the feeling," Coach Genghis said. "I'm the finest gym teacher the world has ever seen, and yet there hasn't even been one parade in my honor."

"Shocking," Nero said, shaking his head.

The Baudelaires and the Quagmires, who were walking behind the adults, looked at one another in disgust at the braggy conversation they were overhearing, but they didn't dare speak to one another until they arrived at the auditorium, taking seats as far away as possible from Carmelita Spats and her loathsome friends.

There is one, and only one, advantage to somebody who cannot play the violin insisting on doing so anyway, and the advantage is that they often play so loudly that they cannot hear if the audience is having a conversation. It is extremely rude, of course, for an audience to talk during a concert performance, but when the performance is a wretched one, and lasts six hours, such rudeness can be forgiven. So it was that evening, for after introducing himself with a brief, braggy speech, Vice Principal Nero stood on the stage of the auditorium and began playing his sonata for the first time.

When you listen to a piece of classical music, it is often amusing to try and guess what inspired the composer to write those particular notes. Sometimes a composer will be inspired by nature and will write a symphony imitating the sounds of birds and trees. Other times a composer will be inspired by the city and will write a concerto imitating the sounds of traffic and sidewalks. In the case of this sonata, Nero had apparently been inspired by somebody beating up a cat, because the music was loud and screechy and made it quite easy to talk during the performance. As Nero sawed away at his violin, the students of Prufrock Prep began to talk amongst themselves. The Baudelaires even noticed Mr. Remora and Mrs. Bass, who were supposed to be figuring out which students owed Nero bags of candy, giggling and sharing a banana in the back row. Only Coach Genghis, who was sitting in the center of the very front row, seemed to be paying any attention to the music.

“Our new gym teacher looks creepy,” Isadora said.

“That’s for sure,” Duncan agreed. “It’s that sneaky look in his eye.”

“That sneaky look,” Violet said, taking a sneaky look herself to make sure Coach Genghis wasn’t listening in, “is because he’s not really Coach Genghis. He’s not really any coach. He’s Count Olaf in disguise.”

“I *knew* you recognized him!” Klaus said.

“Count Olaf?” Duncan said. “How awful! How did he follow you here?”

“Stewak,” Sunny said glumly.

“My sister means something like ‘He follows us everywhere,’” Violet explained, “and she’s right. But it doesn’t matter how he found us. The point is that he’s here and that he undoubtedly has a scheme to snatch our fortune.”

“But why did you pretend not to recognize him?” Klaus asked.

“Yes,” Isadora said. “If you told Vice Principal Nero that he was really Count Olaf, then Nero could throw the cakesniffer out of here, if you’ll pardon my language.”

Violet shook her head to indicate that she disagreed with Isadora and that she didn’t mind about “cakesniffer.” “Olaf’s too clever for that,” she said. “I knew that if I tried to tell Nero that he wasn’t really a gym teacher, he would manage to wiggle out of it, just as he did with Aunt Josephine and Uncle Monty and everybody else.”

“That’s good thinking,” Klaus admitted. “Plus, if Olaf thinks that he’s fooled us, it might give us some more time to figure out exactly what he’s up to.”

“Lirt!” Sunny pointed out.

“My sister means that we can see if any of his assistants are around,” Violet translated. “That’s a good point, Sunny. I hadn’t thought of that.”

“Count Olaf has assistants?” Isadora asked. “That’s not fair. He’s bad enough without people helping him.”

“His assistants are as bad as he is,” Klaus said. “There are two powder-faced women who forced us to be in his play. There’s a hook-handed man who helped Olaf murder our Uncle Monty.”

“And the bald man who bossed us around at the lumbermill, don’t forget him,” Violet added.

“Aeginu!” Sunny said, which meant something like “And the assistant that looks like neither a man nor a woman.”

“What does ‘aeginu’ mean?” Duncan asked, taking out his notebook. “I’m going to write down all these details about Olaf and his troupe.”

“Why?” Violet asked.

“Why?” Isadora repeated. “Because we’re going to help you, that’s why! You don’t think we’d just sit here while you tried to escape from Olaf’s clutches, would you?”

“But Count Olaf is very dangerous,” Klaus said. “If you try and help us, you’ll be risking your lives.”

“Never mind about that,” Duncan said, although I am sorry to tell you that the Quagmire triplets should have minded about that. They should have minded very much. Duncan and Isadora were very brave and caring to try and help the Baudelaire orphans, but bravery often demands a price. By “price” I do not mean something along the lines of five dollars. I mean a much, much bigger price, a price so dreadful that I cannot speak of it now but must return to the scene I am writing at this moment.

“Never mind about that,” Duncan said. “What we need is a plan. Now, we need to prove to Nero that Coach Genghis is really Count Olaf. How can we do that?”

“Nero has that computer,” Violet said thoughtfully. “He showed us a little picture of Olaf on the screen, remember?”

“Yes,” Klaus said, shaking his head. “He told us that the advanced computer system would keep Olaf away. So much for computers.”

Sunny nodded her head in agreement, and Violet picked her up and put her on her lap. Nero had reached a particularly shrieky section of his sonata, and the children had to lean forward to one another in order to continue their conversation. “If we go and see Nero first thing tomorrow morning,” Violet said, “we can talk to him alone, without Olaf butting in. We’ll ask him to use the computer. Nero might not believe us, but the computer should be able to convince him to at least investigate Coach Genghis.”

“Maybe Nero will make him take off the turban,” Isadora said, “revealing Olaf’s only eyebrow.”

“Or take off those expensive-looking running shoes,” Klaus said, “revealing Olaf’s tattoo.”

“But if you talk to Nero,” Duncan said, “then Coach Genghis will know that you’re suspicious.”

“That’s why we’ll have to be extra careful,” Violet said. “We want Nero to find out about Olaf, without Olaf finding out about us.”

“And in the meantime,” Duncan said, “Isadora and I will do some investigating ourselves. Perhaps we can spot one of these assistants you’ve described.”

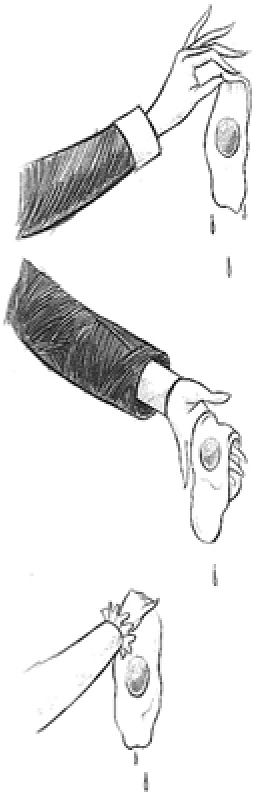
“That would be very useful,” Violet said, “if you’re sure about wanting to help us.”

“Say no more about it,” Duncan said and patted Violet’s hand. And they said no more about it. They didn’t say another word about Count Olaf for the rest of Nero’s sonata, or while he performed it the second time, or the third time, or the fourth time, or the fifth time, or even the sixth time, by which time it was very, very late at night. The Baudelaire orphans and the Quagmire triplets merely sat in a companionable comfort, a phrase which here means many things, all of them happy even though it is quite difficult to be happy while hearing a terrible sonata performed over and over by a man who cannot play the violin, while attending an atrocious boarding school with an evil man sitting nearby undoubtedly planning something dreadful. But happy moments came rarely and unexpectedly in the Baudelaires’ lives, and the three siblings had learned to accept them. Duncan kept his hand on Violet’s and talked to her about terrible concerts he had attended back when the Quagmire parents were alive, and she was happy to hear his stories. Isadora began working on a poem about libraries and showed Klaus what she had written in her notebook, and Klaus was happy to offer suggestions. And Sunny snuggled down in Violet’s lap and chewed on the armrest of her seat, happy to bite something that was so sturdy.

I’m sure you would know, even if I didn’t tell you, that things were about to get much worse for the Baudelaires, but I will end this chapter with this moment of companionable comfort rather than skip ahead to the unpleasant events of the next morning, or the terrible trials of the days that followed, or the horrific crime that marked the end of the Baudelaires’ time at Prufrock Prep. These things happened, of course, and there is no use pretending they didn’t. But for now let us ignore the terrible sonata, the dreadul teachers, the nasty, teasing students, and the even more wretched things that will be happening soon enough. Let us enjoy this brief moment of comfort, as the Baudelaires enjoyed it in the company of the Quagmire triplets and, in Sunny’s case, an armrest. Let us enjoy, at the end of this chapter, the last happy moment any of these children would have for a long, long time.

CHAPTER
Six

Prufrock Preparatory School is now closed. It has been closed for many years, ever since Mrs. Bass was arrested for bank robbery, and if you were to visit it now, you would find it an empty and silent place. If you walked on the lawn, you would not see any children running around, as there were the day the Baudelaires arrived. If you walked by the building containing the classrooms, you would not hear the droning voice of Mr. Remora telling a story, and if you walked by the building containing the auditorium, you would not hear the scrapings and shriekings of Vice Principal Nero playing the violin. If you went and stood beneath the arch, looking up at the black letters spelling out the name of the school and its austere—a word which here means "stern and severe"—motto, you would hear nothing but the *swish* of the breeze through the brown and patchy grass.



In short, if you went and visited Prufrock Preparatory School today, the academy would look more or less as it did when the Baudelaires woke up early the next morning and walked to the administrative building to talk to Nero about Coach Genghis. The three children were so anxious to talk to him that they got up especially early, and as they walked across the lawn it felt as if everyone else at Prufrock Prep had slipped away in the middle of the night, leaving the orphans alone amongst the tombstone-shaped buildings. It was an eerie feeling, which is why Violet and Sunny were surprised when Klaus broke the silence by laughing suddenly.

“What are you snickering at?” Violet asked.

“I just realized something,” Klaus said. “We’re going to the administrative building without an appointment. We’ll have to eat our meals without silverware.”

“There’s nothing funny about that!” Violet said. “What if they serve oatmeal for breakfast? We’ll have to scoop it up with our hands.”

“Oot,” Sunny said, which meant “Trust me, it’s not that difficult,” and at that the Baudelaire sisters joined their brother in laughter. It was not funny, of course, that Nero enforced such terrible punishments, but the idea of eating oatmeal with their hands gave all three siblings the giggles.

“Or fried eggs!” Violet said. “What if they serve runny fried eggs?”

“Or pancakes, covered in syrup!” Klaus said.

“Soup!” Sunny shrieked, and they all broke out in laughter again.

“Remember the picnic?” Violet said. “We were going to Rutabaga River for a picnic, and Father was so excited about the meal he made that he forgot to pack silverware!”

“Of course I remember,” Klaus said. “We had to eat all that sweet-and-sour shrimp with our hands.”

“Sticky!” Sunny said, holding her hands up.

“It sure was,” Violet agreed. “Afterward, we went to wash our hands in the river, and we found a perfect place to try the fishing rod I made.”

“And I picked blackberries with Mother,” Klaus said.

“Eroos,” Sunny said, which meant something like “And I bit rocks.”

The children stopped laughing now as they remembered that afternoon, which hadn’t been so very long ago but felt like it had happened in the distant, distant past. After the fire, the children had known their parents were dead, of course, but it had felt like they had merely gone away somewhere and would be back before long. Now, remembering the way the sunlight had shone on the water of Rutabaga River and the laughter of their parents as they’d made a mess of themselves eating the sweet-and-sour shrimp, the picnic seemed so far away that they knew their parents were never coming back.

“Maybe we’ll go back there,” Violet said quietly. “Maybe someday we can visit the river again, and catch fish and pick blackberries.”

“Maybe we can,” Klaus said, but the Baudelaires all knew that even if someday they went back to Rutabaga River—which they never did, by the way—that it would not be the same. “Maybe we can, but in the meantime we’ve got to talk to Nero. Come on, here’s the administrative building.”

The Baudelaires sighed and walked into the building, surrendering the use of Prufrock Prep’s silverware. They climbed the stairs to the ninth floor and knocked on Nero’s door, surprised that they could not hear him practicing the violin. “Come in if you must,” Nero said, and the orphans walked in. Nero had his back to the door, looking at his reflection in the window as he tied a rubber band around one of his pigtails. When he was finished, he held both hands up in the air. “Ladies and gentlemen, Vice Principal Nero!” he announced, and the children began applauding obediently. Nero whirled around.

“I only expected to hear one person clapping,” he said sternly. “Violet and Klaus, you’re not allowed up here. You know that.”

“I beg your pardon, sir,” Violet said, “but all three of us have something very important we need to discuss with you.”

“*All three of us have something very important we need to discuss with you*,” Nero replied in his usual nasty way. “It must be important for you to sacrifice your silverware privileges. Well, well, out with it. I have a lot of rehearsing to do for my next concert, so don’t waste my time.”

“This won’t take long,” Klaus promised. He paused before continuing, which is a good thing to do if you’re choosing your words very, very carefully. “We are concerned,” he continued, choosing his words very, very carefully, “that Count Olaf may have somehow managed to get to Prufrock Prep.”

“Nonsense,” Nero said. “Now go away and let me practice the violin.”

“But it might not be nonsense,” Violet said. “Olaf is a master of disguise. He could be right under our very noses and we wouldn’t know it.”

“The only thing under *my* nose,” Nero said, “is my mouth, which is telling you to leave.”

“Count Olaf could be Mr. Remora,” Klaus said. “Or Mrs. Bass.”

“Mr. Remora and Mrs. Bass have taught at this school for more than forty-seven years,” Nero said dismissively. “I would know if one of them were in disguise.”

“What about the people who work at the cafeteria?” Violet asked. “They’re always wearing those metal masks.”

“Those are for safety, not for disguises,” Nero said. “You brats have some very silly ideas. Next you’ll be saying that Count Olaf has disguised himself as your boyfriend, what’s-his-name, the triplet.”

Violet blushed. “Duncan Quagmire is not my boyfriend,” she said, “and he’s not Count Olaf, either.”

But Nero was too busy making idiotic jokes to listen. “Who knows?” he asked, and then laughed again. “Hee hee hee. Maybe he’s disguised himself as Carmelita Spats.”

“Or me!” came a voice from the doorway. The Baudelaires whirled around and saw Coach Genghis standing there with a red rose in his hand and a fierce look in his eye.

“Or you!” Nero said. “Hee hee hee. Imagine this Olaf fellow pretending to be the finest gym teacher in the country.”

Klaus looked at Coach Genghis and thought of all the trouble he had caused, whether he was pretending to be Uncle Monty’s assistant Stefano, or Captain Sham, or Shirley, or any of the other phony names he had used. Klaus wanted desperately to say “You *are* Count Olaf!” but he knew that if the Baudelaires pretended that Coach Genghis was fooling them, they had a better chance of revealing his plan, whatever it was. So he bit his tongue, a phrase which here means that he simply kept quiet. He did not actually bite his tongue, but opened his mouth and laughed. “That would be funny!” he lied. “Imagine if you were really Count Olaf! Wouldn’t that be funny, Coach Genghis? That would mean that your turban would really be a disguise!”

“My turban?” Coach Genghis said. His fierce look melted away as he realized—incorrectly, of course—that Klaus was joking. “A disguise? Ho ho ho!”

“Hee hee hee!” Nero laughed.

Violet and Sunny both saw at once what Klaus was doing, and they followed suit. “Oh yes, Genghis,” Violet cried, as if she were joking, “take your turban off and show us the one eyebrow you are hiding! Ha ha ha!”

“You three children are really quite funny!” Nero cried. “You’re like three professional comedians!”

“Volasocks!” Sunny shrieked, showing all four teeth in a fake smile.

“Oh yes,” Klaus said. “Sunny is right! If you were really Olaf in disguise, then your running shoes would be covering your tattoo!”

“Hee hee hee!” Nero said. “You children are like three clowns!”

“Ho ho ho!” Count Olaf said.

“Ha ha ha!” Violet said, who was beginning to feel queasy from faking all this laughter. Looking up at Genghis, and smiling so hard that her teeth ached, she stood on tiptoe and tried to reach his turban. “I’m going to rip this off,” she said, as if she were still joking, “and show off your one eyebrow!”

“Hee hee hee!” Nero said, shaking his pigtails in laughter. “You’re like three trained monkeys!”

Klaus crouched down to the ground and grabbed one of Genghis’s feet. “And I’m going to rip your shoes off,” he said, as if *he* were still joking, “and show off your tattoo!”

"Hee hee hee!" Nero said. "You're like three—"

The Baudelaires didn't get to hear what they were three of, because Coach Genghis stuck out both of his arms, catching Klaus with one hand and Violet with the other. "Ho ho ho!" he said, and then abruptly stopped laughing. "Of course," he said in a tone of voice that was suddenly serious, "I can't take off my running shoes, because I've been exercising and my feet smell, and I can't take off my turban for religious reasons."

"Hee hee—" Nero stopped giggling and became very serious himself. "Oh, Coach Genghis," he said, "we wouldn't ask you to violate your religious beliefs, and I certainly don't want your feet stinking up my office."

Violet struggled to reach the turban and Klaus struggled to remove one of the evil coach's shoes, but Genghis held them both tight.

"Drat!" Sunny shrieked.

"Joke time is over!" Nero announced. "Thank you for brightening up my morning, children. Good-bye, and enjoy your breakfast without silverware! Now, Coach Genghis, what can I do for you?"

"Well, Nero," Genghis said, "I just wanted to give you this rose—a small gift of congratulations for the wonderful concert you gave us last night!"

"Oh, thank you," Nero said, taking the rose out of Genghis's hand and giving it a good smell. "I *was* wonderful, wasn't I?"

"You were *perfection*!" Genghis said. "The first time you played your sonata, I was deeply moved. The second time, I had tears in my eyes. The third time, I was sobbing. The fourth time, I had an uncontrollable emotional attack. The fifth time—"

The Baudelaires did not hear about the fifth time because Nero's door swung shut behind them. They looked at one another in dismay. The Baudelaires had come very close to revealing Coach Genghis's disguise, but close was not enough. They trudged silently out of the administrative building and over to the cafeteria. Evidently, Nero had already called the metal-masked cafeteria workers, because when Violet and Klaus reached the end of the line, the workers refused to hand them any silverware. Prufrock Prep was not serving oatmeal for breakfast, but Violet and Klaus knew that eating scrambled eggs with their hands was not going to be very pleasant.

"Oh, don't worry about that," Isadora said when the children slid glumly into seats beside the Quagmires. "Here, Klaus and I will take turns with my silverware, and you can share with Duncan, Violet. Tell us how everything went in Nero's office."

"Not very well," Violet admitted. "Coach Genghis got there right after we did, and we didn't want him to see that we knew who he really was."

Isadora pulled her notebook out of her pocket and read out loud to her friends.

> "*It would be a stroke of luck*
> *if Coach Genghis were hit by a truck*,"

she read. "That's my latest poem. I know it's not that helpful, but I thought you might like to hear it anyway."

"I did like hearing it," Klaus said. "And it certainly *would* be a stroke of luck if that happened. But I wouldn't bet on it."

"Well, we'll think of another plan," Duncan said, handing Violet his fork.

"I hope so," Violet said. "Count Olaf doesn't usually wait very long to put his evil schemes into action."

"Kosbal!" Sunny shrieked.

“Does Sunny mean ‘I have a plan’?” Isadora asked. “I’m trying to get the hang of her way of talking.”

“I think she means something more like ‘Here comes Carmelita Spats,’” Klaus said, pointing across the cafeteria. Sure enough, Carmelita Spats was walking toward their table with a big, smug smile on her face.

“Hello, you cakesniffers,” she said. “I have a message for you from Coach Genghis. I get to be his Special Messenger because I’m the cutest, prettiest, nicest girl in the whole school.”

“Oh, stop bragging, Carmelita,” Duncan said.

“You’re just jealous,” Carmelita replied, “because Coach Genghis likes me best instead of you.”

“I couldn’t care less about Coach Genghis,” Duncan said. “Just deliver your message and leave us alone.”

“The message is this,” Carmelita said. “The three Baudelaire orphans are to report to the front lawn tonight, immediately after dinner.”

“After dinner?” Violet said. “But after dinner we’re supposed to go to Nero’s violin recital.”

“That’s the message,” Carmelita insisted. “He said that if you don’t show up you’ll be in big trouble, so if I were you, Violet—”

“You *aren’t* Violet, thank goodness,” Duncan interrupted. It is not very polite to interrupt a person, of course, but sometimes if the person is very unpleasant you can hardly stop yourself. “Thank you for your message. Good-bye.”

“It is traditional,” Carmelita said, “to give a Special Messenger a tip after she has delivered a message.”

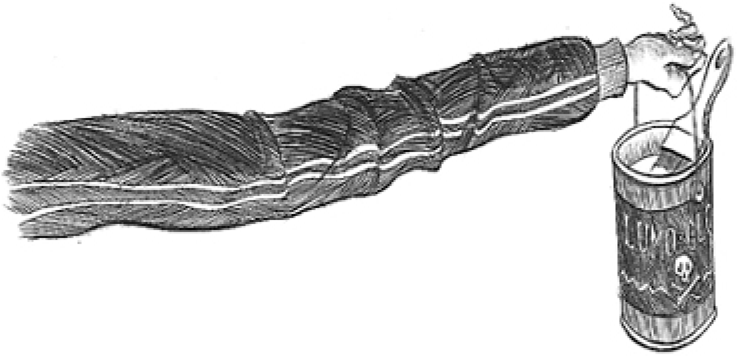
“If you don’t leave us alone,” Isadora said, “you’re going to get a headful of scrambled eggs as a tip.”

“You’re just a jealous cakesniffer,” Carmelita sneered, but she left the Baudelaires and Quagmires alone.

“Don’t worry,” Duncan said when he was sure Carmelita couldn’t hear him. “It’s still morning. We have all day to figure out what to do. Here, have another spoonful of eggs, Violet.”

“No, thank you,” Violet said. “I don’t have much of an appetite.” And it was true. None of the Baudelaires had an appetite. Scrambled eggs had never been the siblings’ favorite dish, particularly Sunny, who much preferred food she could really sink her teeth into, but their lack of appetite had nothing to do with the eggs. It had to do with Coach Genghis, of course, and the message that he had sent to them. It had to do with the thought of meeting him on the lawn, after dinner, all alone. Duncan was right that it was still morning, and that they had all day to figure out what to do. But it did not feel like morning. Violet, Klaus, and Sunny sat in the cafeteria, not taking another bite of their breakfast, and it felt like the sun had already set. It felt like night had already fallen, and that Coach Genghis was already waiting for them. It was only morning, and the Baudelaire orphans already felt like they were in his clutches.

CHAPTER
Seven



The Baudelaire orphans' schoolday was particularly austere, a word which here means that Mr. Remora's stories were particularly boring, Mrs. Bass's obsession with the metric system was particularly irritating, and Nero's administrative demands were particularly difficult, but Violet, Klaus, and Sunny did not really notice. Violet sat at her schooldesk, and anybody who did not know Violet would have thought that she was paying close attention, because her hair was tied up in a ribbon to keep it out of her eyes. But Violet's thoughts were far, far away from the dull tales Mr. Remora was telling. She had tied her hair up, of course, to help focus her keen inventing brain on the problem that was facing the Baudelaires, and she didn't want to waste an ounce of her attention on the rambling, banana-eating man in the front of the room.

Mrs. Bass had brought in a box of pencils for her class and was having them figure out if one of them was any longer or shorter than the rest. And if Mrs. Bass weren't so busy pacing around the room shouting "Measure!" she might have looked at Klaus and thought that perhaps he shared her obsession with measurement, because his eyes were sharply focused as if he were concentrating. But Klaus was spending the morning on autopilot, a word which here means “measuring pencils without really thinking about them.” As he placed pencil after pencil next to his ruler, he was thinking of books he had read that might be helpful for their situation.

And if Vice Principal Nero had stopped practicing his violin and looked in on his infant secretary, he would have guessed that Sunny was working very hard, mailing letters he had dictated to various candy companies complaining about their candy quality. But even though Sunny was typing, stapling, and stamping as quickly as she could, her mind was not on secretarial supplies but on the appointment she and her siblings had with Coach Genghis that evening, and what they could do about it.

The Quagmires were curiously absent from lunch, so the Baudelaires were really forced to eat with their hands this time, but as they picked up handfuls of spaghetti and tried to eat them as neatly as possible the three children were thinking so hard that they barely spoke. They knew, almost without discussing the matter, that none of them had been able to guess Coach Genghis’s plan, and that they hadn’t figured out a way to avoid their appointment with him on the lawn, an appointment that drew closer and closer with every handful of lunch. The Baudelaires passed the afternoon in more or less the same way, ignoring Mr. Remora’s stories, Mrs. Bass’s pencils, and the diminishing supply of staples, and even during gym period—one of Carmelita’s bratty friends informed them that Genghis would start teaching the next day, but in the meantime they were to run around as usual—the three children raced around the lawn in utter silence, devoting all of their brainpower to thinking about their situation.

The Baudelaires had been so very quiet, and thinking so very hard, that when the Quagmires sat down across from them at dinnertime and said in unison, “We’ve solved your problem,” it was more of a startle than a relief.

“Goodness,” Violet said. “You startled me.”

“I thought you’d be relieved,” Duncan said. “Didn’t you hear us? We said we’ve solved your problem.”

“We’re startled *and* relieved,” Klaus said. “What do you mean, you’ve solved our problem? My sisters and I have been thinking about it all day, and we’ve gotten nowhere. We don’t know what Coach Genghis is up to, although we’re sure he’s up to something. And we don’t know how we can avoid meeting him after dinner, although we’re sure that he’ll do something terrible if we do.”

“At first I thought he might simply be planning to kidnap us,” Violet said, “but he wouldn’t have to be in disguise to do that.”

“And at first I thought we should call Mr. Poe after all,” Klaus said, “and tell him what’s going on. But if Count Olaf can fool an advanced computer, he’ll surely be able to fool an average banker.”

“Toricia!” Sunny said in agreement.

“Duncan and I have been thinking about it all day, too,” Isadora said. “I filled up five and a half pages of my notebook writing down possible ideas, and Duncan filled up three.”

“I write smaller,” Duncan explained, handing his fork to Violet so she could take her turn at the meat loaf they were having for dinner.

“Right before lunch, we compared notes,” Isadora continued, “and the two of us had the same idea. So we sneaked away and put our plan into action.”

“That’s why we weren’t at lunch,” Duncan explained. “You’ll notice that there are puddles of beverages on our tray instead of glasses.”

“Well, you can share *our* glasses,” Klaus said, handing his to Isadora, “just like you’re letting us share your silverware. But what is your plan? What did you put into action?”

Duncan and Isadora looked at one another, smiled, and leaned in close to the Baudelaires so they could be sure no one would overhear.

“We propped open the back door of the auditorium,” Duncan said. He and Isadora smiled triumphantly and leaned back in their chairs. The Baudelaires did not feel triumphant. They felt confused. They did not want to insult their friends, who had broken the rules and sacrificed their drinking glasses just to help them, but they were unable to see how propping open the back door of the auditorium was a solution to the trouble in which they found themselves.

“I’m sorry,” Violet said after a pause. “I don’t understand how propping open the back door of the auditorium solves our problem.”

“Don’t you see?” Isadora asked. “We’re going to sit in the back of the auditorium tonight, and as soon as Nero begins his concert, we will tiptoe out and sneak over to the front lawn. That way we can keep an eye on you and Coach Genghis. If anything fishy happens, we will run back to the concert and alert Vice Principal Nero.”

“It’s the perfect plan, don’t you think?” Duncan asked. “I’m rather proud of my sister and me, if I do say so myself.”

The Baudelaire children looked at one another doubtfully. They didn’t want to disappoint their friends or criticize the plan that the Quagmire triplets had cooked up, particularly since the Baudelaires hadn’t cooked up any plan themselves. But Count Olaf was so evil and so clever that the three siblings couldn’t help but think that propping a door open and sneaking out to spy on him was not much of a defense against his treachery.

“We appreciate you trying to solve our problem,” Klaus said gently, “but Count Olaf is an extremely treacherous person. He always has something up his sleeve. I wouldn’t want you to get into any danger on our behalf.”

“Don’t talk nonsense,” Isadora said firmly, taking a sip from Violet’s glass. “You’re the ones in danger, and it’s up to us to help you. And we’re not frightened of Olaf. I’m confident this plan is a good one.”

The Baudelaires looked at one another again. It was very brave of the Quagmire triplets not to be frightened of Olaf and to be so confident about their plan. But the three siblings could not help but wonder if the Quagmires should be so brave. Olaf was such a wretched man that it seemed wise to be frightened of him, and he had defeated so many of the

Baudelaires' plans that it seemed a little foolish to be so confident about this one. But the children were so appreciative of their friends' efforts that they said nothing more about the matter. In the years to come, the Baudelaire orphans would regret this, this time when they said nothing more about the matter, but in the meantime they merely finished their dinner with the Quagmires, passing silverware and drinking glasses back and forth and trying to talk about other things. They discussed other projects they might do to improve the Orphans Shack, and what other matters they might research in the library, and what they could do about Sunny's problem with the staples, which were running out quite rapidly, and before they knew it dinner was over. The Quagmires hurried off to the violin recital, promising to sneak out as quickly as they could, and the Baudelaires walked out of the cafeteria and over to the front lawn.

The last few rays of the sunset made the children cast long, long shadows as they walked, as if the Baudelaires had been stretched across the brown grass by some horrible mechanical device. The children looked down at their shadows, which looked as flimsy as sheets of paper, and wished with every step that they could do something else—*anything* else—other than meet Coach Genghis alone on the front lawn. They wished they could just keep walking, under the arch, past the front lawn, and out into the world, but where could they go? The three orphans were all alone in the world. Their parents were dead. Their banker was too busy to take good care of them. And their only friends were two more orphans, who the Baudelaires sincerely hoped had snuck out of the recital by now and were spying on them as they approached the solitary figure of Coach Genghis, waiting for them impatiently on the edge of the lawn. The waning light of the sunset—the word "waning" here means "dim, and making everything look extra-creepy"—made the shadow of the coach's turban look like a huge, deep hole.

"You're late," Genghis said in his scratchy voice. As the siblings reached him, they could see that he had both hands behind his back as if he were hiding something. "Your instructions were to be here right after dinner, and you're late."

“We’re very sorry,” Violet said, craning her neck to try and catch a glimpse of what was behind his back. “It took us a little longer to eat our dinner without silverware.”

“If you were smart,” Genghis said, “you would have borrowed the silverware of one of your friends.”

“We never thought of that,” Klaus said. When one is forced to tell atrocious lies, one often feels a guilty flutter in one’s stomach, and Klaus felt such a flutter now. “You certainly are an intelligent man,” he continued.

“Not only am I intelligent,” Genghis agreed, “but I’m also very smart. Now, let’s get right to work. Even stupid children like yourselves should remember what I said about orphans having excellent bone structure for running. That’s why you are about to do Special Orphan Running Exercises, or S.O.R.E. for short.”

“Ooladu!” Sunny shrieked.

“My sister means that sounds exciting,” Violet said, although “Ooladu!” actually meant “I wish you’d tell us what you’re *really* up to, Genghis.”

“I’m glad you’re so enthusiastic,” Genghis said. “In certain cases, enthusiasm can make up for a lack of brainpower.” He took his hands from behind his back, and the children saw that he was holding a large metal can and a long, prickly brush. The can was open, and an eerie white glow was shining out of the top. “Now, before we begin S.O.R.E., we’ll need a track. This is luminous paint, which means it glows in the dark.”

“How interesting,” Klaus said, although he’d known what the word “luminous” means for two and a half years.

“Well, if you find it so interesting,” Genghis said, his eyes looking as luminous as the paint, “you can be in charge of the brush. *Here*.” He thrust the long, prickly brush into Klaus’s hands. “And you little girls can hold the paint can. I want you to paint a big circle on the grass so you can see where you are running when you start your laps. Go on, what are you waiting for?”

The Baudelaires looked at one another. What they were waiting for, of course, was Genghis revealing what he was really up to with the paint, the brush, and the ridiculous Special Orphan Running Exercises. But in the meantime, they figured they'd better do as Genghis said. Painting a big, luminous circle on the lawn didn't seem to be particularly dangerous, so Violet picked up the paint can, and Klaus dipped the brush into the paint and began making a big circle. For the moment, Sunny was something of a fifth wheel, a phrase which means "not in a position to do anything particularly helpful," but she crawled alongside her siblings, offering moral support.

"Bigger!" Genghis called out in the dark. "Wider!" The Baudelaires followed his instructions and made the circle bigger and wider, walking farther away from Genghis and leaving a glowing trail of paint. They looked out into the gloom of the evening, wondering where the Quagmire triplets were hiding, or if indeed they had managed to sneak out of the recital at all. But the sun was down now, and the only thing the orphans could see was the bright circle of light they were painting on the lawn and the dim figure of Genghis, his white turban looking like a floating skull in the night. "Bigger! Wider! All right, all right, that's big and wide enough! Finish the circle where I am standing! Hurry up!"

“What do you think we’re *really* doing?” Violet whispered to her brother.

“I don’t know,” Klaus said. “I’ve only read three or four books on paint. I know that paint can sometimes be poisonous or cause birth defects. But Genghis isn’t making us eat the circle, and you’re not pregnant, of course, so I can’t imagine.”

Sunny wanted to add “Gargaba!” which meant “Maybe the luminous paint is serving as some sort of glowing signal,” but the Baudelaires had come full circle and were too close to Genghis to do any more talking.

“I suppose that will do, orphans,” Genghis said, snatching the brush and the can of paint out of their hands. “Now, take your marks, and when I blow my whistle, begin running around the circle you’ve made until I tell you to stop.”

“What?” Violet said. As I’m sure you know, there are two types of “What?” in the world. The first type simply means “Excuse me, I didn’t hear you. Could you please repeat yourself?” The second type is a little trickier. It means something more along the lines of “Excuse me, I did hear you, but I can’t believe that’s really what you meant,” and this second type is obviously the type Violet was using at this moment. She was standing right next to Genghis, so she’d obviously heard what had come out of the smelly mouth of this miserable man. But she couldn’t believe that Genghis was simply going to make them run laps. He was such a sneaky and revolting person that the eldest Baudelaire simply could not accept that his scheme was only as evil as the average gym class.

“*What*?” Genghis repeated in a mocking way. He had obviously taken a page out of Nero’s book, a phrase which here means “learned how to repeat things in a mocking way, in order to make fun of children.” “I know you heard me, little orphan girl. You’re standing right next to me. Now take your marks, all of you, and begin running as soon as I blow my whistle.”

“But Sunny is a baby,” Klaus protested. “She can’t really run, at least not professionally.”

“Then she may crawl as fast as she can,” Genghis replied. “Now—on your marks, get set, *go*!”

Genghis blew his whistle and the Baudelaire orphans began to run, pacing themselves so they could run together even though they had different-sized legs. They finished one lap, and then another, and then another and another and then five more and then another and then seven more and then another and then three more and then two more and then another and then another and then six more and then they lost track. Coach Genghis kept blowing his whistle and occasionally shouted tedious and unhelpful things like “Keep running!” or “Another lap!” The children looked down at the luminous circle so they could stay in a circle, and the children looked over at Genghis as he grew fainter and then clearer as they finished a lap, and the children looked out into the darkness to see if they could catch a glimpse of the Quagmires.

The Baudelaires also looked at one another from time to time, but they didn’t speak, not even when they were far enough away from Genghis that he could not overhear. One reason they did not speak was to conserve energy, because although the Baudelaires were in reasonably good shape, they had not run so many laps in their lives, and before too long they were breathing too hard to really discuss anything. But the other reason they did not speak was that Violet had already spoken for them when she had asked the second type of “What?” Coach Genghis kept blowing his whistle, and the children kept running around and around the track, and echoing in each of their minds was this second, trickier type of question. The three siblings had heard Coach Genghis, but they couldn’t believe that S.O.R.E. was the extent of his evil plan. The Baudelaire orphans kept running around the glowing circle until the first rays of sunrise began to reflect on the jewel in Genghis’s turban, and all they could think was *What? What? What*?

CHAPTER
Eight

“*What*?” Isadora asked.

“I said, ‘Finally, as the sun rose, Coach Genghis had us stop running laps and let us go to bed,’” Klaus said.

“My sister didn’t mean that she didn’t hear you,” Duncan explained. “She meant that she heard you, but she didn’t believe that’s really what you meant. And to tell you the truth, I can scarcely believe it myself, even though I saw it with my own eyes.”

“I can’t believe it either,” Violet said, wincing as she took a bite of the salad that the masked people had served for lunch. It was the next afternoon, and all three Baudelaire orphans were doing a great deal of wincing, a word which here means “frowning in pain, alarm, or distress.” When Coach Genghis had called last night’s activities S.O.R.E., he had merely used the name as an acronym for Special Orphan Running Exercises, but the three children thought that the name S.O.R.E. was even more appropriate than that. After a full night of S.O.R.E., they’d been sore all day. Their legs were sore from all their running. When they’d finally entered the Orphans Shack to go to sleep, they had been too tired to put on their noisy shoes, so their toes were sore from the claws of the tiny territorial crabs. And their heads were sore, not only from headaches, which often occur when one doesn’t get enough sleep, but also from trying to figure out what Coach Genghis was up to in making them run all those laps. The Baudelaire legs were sore, the Baudelaire toes were sore, the Baudelaire heads were sore, and soon the muscles on the sides of the Baudelaire mouths would be sore from wincing all day long.

It was lunchtime, and the three children were trying to discuss the previous evening with the Quagmire triplets, who weren’t very sore and not nearly as tired. One reason was that they had been hiding behind the archway, spying on Genghis and the Baudelaires, instead of running around and around the luminous circle. The other reason was that the Quagmires had done their spying in shifts. After the Baudelaires had run the first few laps and there was no sign of them stopping, the two triplets had decided to alternate between Duncan sleeping and Isadora spying, and Duncan spying and Isadora sleeping. The two siblings promised each other that they would wake up the sleeping one if the spying one noticed anything unusual.

“I had the last shift,” Duncan explained, “so my sister didn’t see the end of S.O.R.E. But it doesn’t matter. All that happened was that Coach Genghis had you stop running laps and let you go to bed. I thought that he might insist on getting your fortune before you could stop running.”

“And I thought that the luminous circle would serve as a landing strip,” Isadora said, “for a helicopter, piloted by one of his assistants, to swoop down and take you away. The only thing I couldn’t figure out was why you had to run all those laps before the helicopter showed up.”

“But the helicopter didn’t show up,” Klaus said, taking a sip of water and wincing. “Nothing showed up.”

“Maybe the pilot got lost,” Isadora said.

“Or maybe Coach Genghis became as tired as you did, and forgot to ask for your fortune,” Duncan said.

Violet shook her sore head. “He would never get too tired to get our fortune,” she said. “He’s up to something, that much is for sure, but I just can’t figure out what it is.”

“Of course you can’t figure it out,” Duncan said. “You’re exhausted. I’m glad Isadora and I thought of spying in shifts. We’re going to use all our spare time to investigate. We’ll go through all of our notes, and do some more research in the library. There must be something that can help us figure it out.”

“I’ll do research, too,” Klaus said, yawning. “I’m quite good at it.”

“I know you are,” Isadora said, smiling. “But not today, Klaus. We’ll work on uncovering Genghis’s plan, and you three can catch up on your sleep. You’re too tired to do much good in a library or anywhere else.”

Violet and Klaus looked at each other’s tired faces, and then down at their baby sister, and they saw that the Quagmire triplets were right. Violet had been so tired that she had taken only a few notes on Mr. Remora’s painfully dull stories. Klaus had been so tired that he had incorrectly measured nearly all of Mrs. Bass’s objects. And although Sunny had not reported what she had done that morning in Nero’s office, she couldn’t have been a very good administrative assistant, because she had fallen asleep right there in the cafeteria, her little head on her salad, as if it were a soft pillow instead of leaves of lettuce, slices of tomato, gobs of creamy honey-mustard dressing, and crispy croutons, which are small toasted pieces of bread that give a salad some added crunch. Violet gently lifted her sister’s head out of the salad and shook a few croutons out of her hair. Sunny winced, made a faint, miserable noise, and went back to sleep in Violet’s lap. “Perhaps you’re right, Isadora,” Violet said. “We’ll stumble through the afternoon somehow and get a good night’s sleep tonight. If we’re lucky, Vice Principal Nero will play something quiet at tonight’s concert and we can sleep through that as well.”

You can see, with that last sentence, just how tired Violet really was, because “if we’re lucky” is not a phrase that she, or either of her siblings, used very often. The reason, of course, is quite clear: the Baudelaire orphans were not lucky. Smart, yes. Charming, yes. Able to survive austere situations, yes. But the children were not lucky, and so wouldn’t use the phrase “if we’re lucky” any more than they would use the phrase “if we’re stalks of celery,” because neither phrase was appropriate. If the Baudelaire orphans had been stalks of celery, they would not have been small children in great distress, and if they had been lucky, Carmelita Spats would not have approached their table at this particular moment and delivered another unfortunate message.

“Hello, you cakesniffers,” she said, “although judging from the baby brat you’re more like saladsniffers. I have another message for you from Coach Genghis. I get to be his Special Messenger because I’m the cutest, prettiest, nicest little girl in the whole school.”

“If you were really the nicest person in the whole school,” Isadora said, “you wouldn’t make fun of a sleeping infant. But never mind, what is the message?”

“It’s actually the same one as last time,” Carmelita said, “but I’ll repeat it in case you’re too stupid to remember. The three Baudelaire orphans are to report to the front lawn tonight, immediately after dinner.”

“What?” Klaus asked.

“Are you *deaf* as well as cakesniffy?” Carmelita asked. “I said—”

“Yes, yes, Klaus heard you,” Isadora said quickly. “He didn’t mean that kind of ‘What?’ We have received the message, Carmelita. Now please go away.”

“That’s two tips you owe me,” Carmelita said, but she flounced off.

“I can’t believe it,” Violet said. “Not more laps! My legs are almost too sore to walk, let alone run.”

“Carmelita didn’t say anything about more laps,” Duncan pointed out. “Maybe Coach Genghis is putting his real plan into action tonight. In any case, we’ll sneak out of the recital again and keep an eye on you.”

“In shifts,” Isadora added, nodding in agreement. “And I bet we’ll have a clear picture of his plan by then. We have the rest of the day to do research.” Isadora paused, and flipped open her black notebook to the right page. She read, *"Don't worry Baudelaires, don't feel disgrace—The Quagmire triplets are on the case*."

"Thank you," Klaus said, giving Isadora a tired smile of appreciation. "My sisters and I are thankful for all your help. And we're going to put our minds to the problem, even though we're too exhausted to do research. If we're lucky, all of us working together can defeat Coach Genghis."

There was that phrase again, "if we're lucky," coming out of the mouth of a Baudelaire, and once again it felt about as appropriate as "if we're stalks of celery." The only difference was that the Baudelaire orphans did not wish to be stalks of celery. While it is true that if they were stalks of celery they would not be orphans because celery is a plant and so cannot really be said to have parents, Violet, Klaus, and Sunny did not wish to be the stringy, low-calorie vegetable. Unfortunate things can happen to celery as easily as they can happen to children. Celery can be sliced into small pieces and dipped into clam dip at fancy parties. It can be coated in peanut butter and served as a snack. It can merely sit in a field and rot away, if the nearby celery farmers are lazy or on vacation. All these terrible things can happen to celery, and the orphans knew it, so if you were to ask the Baudelaires if they wanted to be stalks of celery they would say of course not. But they wanted to be lucky. The Baudelaires did not necessarily want to be extremely lucky, like someone who finds a treasure map or someone who wins a lifetime supply of ice cream in a contest, or like the man—and not, alas, me—who was lucky enough to marry my beloved Beatrice, and live with her in happiness over the course of her short life. But the Baudelaires wanted to be lucky enough. They wanted to be lucky enough to figure out how to escape Coach Genghis's clutches, and it seemed that being lucky would be their only chance. Violet was too tired to invent anything, and Klaus was too tired to read anything, and Sunny, still asleep in Violet's lap, was too tired to bite anything or anybody, and it seemed that even with the diligence of the Quagmire triplets—the word "diligence" here means "ability to take good notes in dark green and pitch-black notebooks"—they needed to be lucky if they wanted to stay alive. The Baudelaires huddled together as if the cafeteria were extremely cold, wincing in soreness and worry. It seemed to the Baudelaire orphans that they wanted to be lucky more than they had in their entire lives.

CHAPTER
Nine

Occasionally, events in one's life become clearer through the prism of experience, a phrase which simply means that things tend to become clearer as time goes on. For instance, when a person is just born, they usually have no idea what curtains are and spend a great deal of their first months wondering why on earth Mommy and Daddy have hung large pieces of cloth over each window in the nursery. But as the person grows older, the idea of curtains becomes clearer through the prism of experience. The person will learn the word "curtains" and notice that they are actually quite handy for keeping a room dark when it is time to sleep, and for decorating an otherwise boring window area. Eventually, they will entirely accept the idea of curtains, and may even purchase some curtains of their own, or venetian blinds, and it is all due to the prism of experience.

Coach Genghis's S.O.R.E. program, however, was one event that didn't seem to get any clearer at all through the Baudelaire orphans' prism of experience. If anything, it grew even harder and harder to understand, because Violet, Klaus, and Sunny became so utterly exhausted as the days—and, more particularly, the nights—wore on. After the children received their second message from Carmelita Spats, they spent the rest of the afternoon wondering what Coach Genghis would make them do that evening. The Quagmire triplets wondered along with them, so everyone was surprised—the Baudelaires, who met Genghis out on the front lawn after dinner again, and the Quagmires, who tiptoed out of the recital and spied on them, in shifts, from behind the archway again—when Genghis began blowing his whistle and ordered the Baudelaire orphans to begin running. The Baudelaires and Quagmires thought that surely Genghis would do something far more sinister than more laps.

But while a second evening of running laps might have lacked in sinisterity, Violet, Klaus, and Sunny were too exhausted to notice. They could scarcely hear the shrieks of Genghis's whistle and his cries of "Keep running!" and "Another lap!" over the sound of their own desperate panting for breath. They grew so sweaty that the orphans thought they would give up the entire Baudelaire fortune for a good long shower. And their legs grew so sore that the children forgot, even with their prism of experience, what it felt like to have legs that didn't ache from thigh to toe.

Lap after lap the Baudelaires ran, hardly taking their eyes off the circle of luminous paint that still glowed brightly on the darkening lawn, and staring at this circle was somehow the worst part of all. As the evening turned to night, the luminous circle was all the Baudelaires could really see, and it imprinted itself into their eyes so they could see it even when they were staring desperately into the darkness. If you've ever had a flash photograph taken, and the blob of the flash has stayed in your view for a few moments afterward, then you are familiar with what was happening to the Baudelaires, except the glowing circle stayed in their minds for so long that it became symbolic. The word "symbolic" here means that the glowing circle felt like it stood for more than merely a track, and what it stood for was zero. The luminous zero glowed in the Baudelaire minds, and it was symbolic of what they knew of their situation. They knew zero about what Genghis was up to. They knew zero about why they were running endless laps. And they had zero energy to think about it.

Finally, the sun began to rise, and Coach Genghis dismissed his orphan track team. The Baudelaires stumbled blearily to the Orphans Shack, too tired to even see if Duncan and Isadora were sneaking back to their dormitory after their last shift of spying. Once again, the three siblings were too tired to put on their noisy shoes, so their toes were doubly sore when they awoke, just two hours later, to begin another groggy day. But—and I shudder to tell you this—this was not the last groggy day for the Baudelaire orphans. The dreadful Carmelita Spats delivered them the usual message at lunch, after they spent the morning dozing through classes and secretarial duties, and the Baudelaires put their heads on the cafeteria table in despair at the idea of another night of running. The Quagmires tried to comfort them, promising to double their research efforts, but Violet, Klaus, and Sunny were too tired for conversation, even with their closest friends. Luckily, their closest friends understood completely and didn't find the Baudelaires' silence rude or discouraging.

It seems impossible to believe that the three Baudelaires managed to survive another evening of S.O.R.E., but in times of extreme stress one can often find energy hidden in even the most exhausted areas of the body. I discovered this myself when I was woken up in the middle of the night and chased sixteen miles by an angry mob armed with torches, swords, and vicious dogs, and the Baudelaire orphans discovered it as they ran laps, not only for that night but also for six nights following. This made a grand total of nine S.O.R.E. sessions, although "grand" would seem to be the wrong word for endless evenings of desperate panting, sweaty bodies, and achy legs. For nine nights, the Baudelaire brains were plagued with the symbolic, luminous zero glowing in their minds like a giant donut of despair.

As the Baudelaire orphans suffered, their schoolwork suffered with them. As I'm sure you know, a good night's sleep helps you perform well in school, and so if you are a student you should always get a good night's sleep unless you have come to the good part of your book, and then you should stay up all night and let your schoolwork fall by the wayside, a phrase which means "flunk." In the days that followed, the Baudelaires were much more exhausted than somebody who had stayed up all night reading, and their schoolwork did more than fall by the wayside. It fell *off* the wayside, a phrase which here has different meanings for each child. For Violet, it meant that she was so drowsy that she did not write down a single word of Mr. Remora's stories. For Klaus, it meant that he was so weary that he didn't measure a single one of Mrs. Bass's objects. And for Sunny, it meant that she was so exhausted that she didn't do anything Vice Principal

Nero assigned her to do. The Baudelaire orphans believed that doing well in school was extremely important, even if the school happened to be run by a tyrannical idiot, but they were simply too fatigued from their nightly laps to do their assigned work. Before long, the circle of luminous paint was not the only zero the Baudelaires saw. Violet saw a zero at the top of her paper when she was unable to recall any of Mr. Remora's stories for a test. Klaus saw a zero in Mrs. Bass's gradebook when he was called on to report the exact length of a tube sock he was supposed to be measuring and was discovered to be taking a nap instead. And Sunny saw a zero when she checked the staple drawer and saw that there were zero staples inside.

"This is getting ridiculous," Isadora said when Sunny updated her siblings and friends at the start of another weary lunch. "Look at you, Sunny. It was inappropriate to hire you as an administrative assistant in the first place, and it's simply absurd to have you crawl laps by night and make your own staples by day."

"Don't call my sister absurd or ridiculous!" Klaus cried.

"I'm not calling *her* ridiculous!" Isadora said. "I'm calling the *situation* ridiculous!"

"Ridiculous means you want to laugh at it," said Klaus, who was never too tired to define words, "and I don't want you laughing at us."

"I'm not laughing at you," Isadora said. "I'm trying to help."

Klaus snatched his drinking glass from Isadora's side of the table. "Well, laughing at us doesn't help at all, you cakesniffer."

Isadora snatched her silverware from Klaus's hands. "Calling me names doesn't help either, Klaus."

"Mumdum!" Sunny shrieked.

"Oh, stop it, both of you," Duncan said. "Isadora, can't you see that Klaus is just tired? And Klaus, can't you see that Isadora is just frustrated?"

Klaus took his glasses off and returned his drinking glass to Isadora. “I’m too tired to see anything,” he said. “I’m sorry, Isadora. Being tired makes me crabby. In a few days I’ll turn as nasty as Carmelita Spats.”

Isadora handed her silverware back to Klaus and patted him on the hand in forgiveness. “You’ll never be as nasty as Carmelita Spats,” she said.

“Carmelita Spats?” Violet said, lifting her head from her tray. She had dozed through Isadora and Klaus’s argument but woken up at the sound of the Special Messenger’s name. “She’s not coming here again to tell us to do laps, is she?”

“I’m afraid she is,” Duncan said ruefully, a word which here means “while pointing at a rude, violent, and filthy little girl.”

“Hello, cakesniffers,” Carmelita Spats said. “Today I have two messages for you, so I should really get two tips instead of one.”

“Oh, Carmelita,” Klaus said. “You haven’t gotten a tip for the last nine days, and I see no reason to break that tradition.”

“That’s because you’re a stupid orphan,” Carmelita Spats said promptly. “In any case, message number one is the usual: meet Coach Genghis on the front lawn right after dinner.”

Violet gave an exhausted groan. “And what’s the second message?” she asked.

“The second message is that you must report to Vice Principal Nero’s office right away.”

“Vice Principal Nero’s office?” Klaus asked. “Why?”

“I’m sorry,” Carmelita Spats said with a nasty smile to indicate that she wasn’t sorry one bit. “I don’t answer questions from nontipping orphan cakesniffers.”

Some children at the neighboring table laughed when they heard that and began banging their silverware on the table. “Cakesniffing orphans in the Orphans Shack! Cakesniffing orphans in the Orphans Shack!" they chanted as Carmelita Spats giggled and skipped off to finish her lunch. "Cakesniffing orphans in the Orphans Shack! Cakesniffing orphans in the Orphans Shack!" they chanted while the Baudelaires sighed and stood up on their aching legs. "We'd better go to Nero's," Violet said. "We'll see you later, Duncan and Isadora."

"Nonsense," Duncan said. "We'll walk you. Carmelita Spats has made me lose my appetite, so we'll skip lunch and take you to the administrative building. We won't go inside—otherwise there'll be no silverware between the five of us—but we'll wait outside and you can tell us what's going on."

"I wonder what Nero wants," Klaus said, yawning.

"Maybe he's discovered that Genghis is really Olaf, all by himself," Isadora said, and the Baudelaires smiled back. They didn't dare hope that this was the reason for their summons to Nero's office, but they appreciated their friends' hopefulness. The five children handed their scarcely eaten lunches to the cafeteria workers, who blinked at them silently from behind their metal masks, and walked to the administrative building. The Quagmire triplets wished the Baudelaires luck, and Violet, Klaus, and Sunny trudged up the steps to Nero's office.

"Thank you for taking the time out of your busy orphan schedule to see me," Vice Principal Nero said, yanking open his door before they could knock. "Hurry up and come inside. Every minute I spend talking to you is a minute I could spend practicing the violin, and when you're a musical genius like me, every minute counts."

The three children walked into the tiny office and began clapping their tired hands together as Nero raised both his arms in the air. "There are two things I wanted to talk to you about," he said when the applause was over. "Do you know what they are?"

"No, sir," Violet replied.

"*No, sir,*" Nero mimicked, although he looked disappointed that the children hadn't given him a longer answer to make fun of. "Well, the first one is that the three of you have missed nine of my violin concerts, and each of you owes me a bag of candy for each one. Nine bags of candy times three equals twenty-nine. In addition, Carmelita Spats has told me that she has delivered ten messages to you, if you include the two she delivered today, and that you've never given her a tip. That's a disgrace. Now, I think a nice tip is a pair of earrings with precious stones, so you owe her ten pairs of earings. What do you have to say about that?"

The Baudelaire orphans looked at one another with their sleepy, sleepy eyes. They had nothing to say about that. They had plenty to *think* about that—that they'd only missed Nero's concerts because Coach Genghis had forced them to, that nine bags of candy times three equals twenty-seven, not twenty-nine, and that tips are always optional and usually consist of money instead of earrings—but Violet, Klaus, and Sunny were too tired to say anything about it at all. This was another disappointment to Vice Principal Nero, who stood there scratching his pigtails and waiting for one of the children to say something that he could repeat in his nasty, mocking voice. But after a moment of silence, the vice principal went on to the second thing. "The second thing," he said, going on, "is that you three have become the worst students Prufrock Preparatory School has ever seen. Violet, Mr. Remora tells me that you have flunked a test. Klaus, Mrs. Bass reports that you can scarcely tell one end of a metric ruler from another. And Sunny, I've noticed that you haven't made a single staple! Mr. Poe told me you were intelligent and hardworking children, but you're just a bunch of cakesniffers!"

At this, the Baudelaires could keep quiet no longer. "We're flunking school because we're exhausted!" Violet cried.

"And we're exhausted because we're running laps every night!" Klaus cried.

"Galuka!" Sunny shrieked, which meant "So yell at Coach Genghis, not at us!"

Vice Principal Nero gave the children a big smile, delighted that he was able to answer them in his favorite way. "*We're flunking school because we're exhausted*!" he squealed. "*And we're exhausted because we're* *running laps every night! Galuka*! I've had enough of your nonsense! Prufrock Preparatory School has promised you an excellent education, and an excellent education you will get—or, in Sunny's case, an excellent job as an administrative assistant! Now, I've instructed Mr. Remora and Mrs. Bass to give comprehensive exams tomorrow—large tests on absolutely everything you've learned so far. Violet, you'd better remember every detail of Mr. Remora's stories, and Klaus, you'd better remember the length, width, and depths of Mrs. Bass's objects, or I will expel you from school. Also, I've found a bunch of papers that need to be stapled tomorrow. Sunny, you will staple all of them, with homemade staples, or I will expel you from your job. First thing tomorrow morning we will have the test and the stapling, and if you don't get As and make enough staples, you'll leave Prufrock Preparatory School. Luckily for you, Coach Genghis has offered to home-school you. That means he'd be your coach, your teacher, and your guardian, all in one. It's a very generous offer, and if I were you I'd give *him* a tip, too, although I don't think earrings are appropriate in this case."

"We're not going to give Count Olaf a tip!" Violet blurted out.

Klaus looked at his older sister in horror. "Violet means Coach Genghis," Klaus said quickly to Nero.

"I *do not*!" Violet cried. "Klaus, our situation is too desperate to pretend not to recognize him any longer!"

"Hifijoo!" Sunny agreed.

"I guess you're right," Klaus said. "What have we got to lose?"

"*What have we got to lose*?" Nero mocked. "What are you talking about?"

"We're talking about Coach Genghis," Violet said. "He's not really named Genghis. He's not even a real coach. He's Count Olaf in disguise."

"Nonsense!" Nero said.

Klaus wanted to say "*Nonsense*!" right back at Nero, in Nero's own repulsive way, but he bit his exhausted tongue. "It's true," he said. "He's put a turban over his eyebrow and expensive running shoes over his tattoo, but he's still Count Olaf."

"He has a turban for religious reasons," Nero said, "and running shoes because he's a coach. Look here." He strode over to the computer and pressed a button. The screen began to glow in its usual seasick way, and once again showed a picture of Count Olaf. "You see? Coach Genghis looks nothing like Count Olaf, and my advanced computer system proves it."

"Ushilo!" Sunny cried, which meant "That doesn't prove anything!"

"*Ushilo*!" Nero mocked. "Who am I going to believe, an advanced computer system or two children flunking school and a little baby too dumb to make her own staples? Now, stop wasting my time! I will personally oversee tomorrow's comprehensive exams, which will be given in the Orphans Shack! And you'd better do excellent work, or it's a free ride from Coach Genghis! Sayonara, Baudelaires!"

"Sayonara" is the Japanese word for goodbye, and I'm sure that each and every one of the millions of people who live in Japan would be ashamed to hear their language used by such a revolting person. But the Baudelaire orphans had no time to think such international thoughts. They were too busy giving the Quagmire triplets the latest news.

"This is awful!" Duncan cried as the five children trudged across the lawn so they could talk things over in peace. "There's no way you can get an A on those exams, particularly if you have to run laps tonight!"

"This is dreadful!" Isadora cried. "There's no way you can make all those staples, either! You'll be homeschooled before you know it!"

"Coach Genghis won't homeschool us," Violet said, looking out at the front lawn, where the luminous zero was waiting for them. "He'll do something much, much worse. Don't you see? That's why he's made us run all those laps! He *knew* we'd be exhausted. He *knew* we'd flunk our classes, or fail to perform our secretarial duties. He *knew* we'd be expelled from Prufrock Prep, and then he could get his hands on us."

Klaus groaned. "We've been waiting for his plan to be made clear, and now it is. But it might be too late."

"It's not too late," Violet insisted. "The comprehensive exams aren't until tomorrow morning. We must be able to figure out a plan by then."

"Plan!" Sunny agreed.

"It'll have to be a complicated plan," Duncan said. "We have to get Violet ready for Mr. Remora's test, and Klaus ready for Mrs. Bass's test."

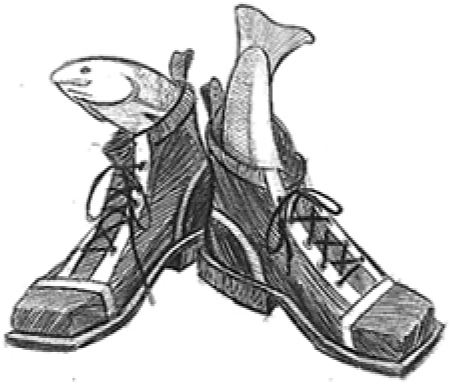
"And we have to make staples," Isadora said. "And the Baudelaires still have to run laps."

"And we have to stay awake," Klaus said.

The children looked at one another, and then out at the front lawn. The afternoon sun was shining brightly, but the five youngsters knew that soon it would set behind the tombstone-shaped buildings, and that it would be time for S.O.R.E. They didn't have much time. Violet tied her hair up in a ribbon to keep it out of her eyes. Klaus polished his glasses and set them on his nose. Sunny scraped her teeth together, to make sure they were sharp enough for any task ahead. And the two triplets took their notebooks out of their sweater pockets. Coach Genghis's evil plan had become clear through the prism of the Baudelaire and Quagmire experiences, and now they had to use their experience to make a plan of their own.

CHAPTER
Ten

The three Baudelaire orphans and the two Quagmire triplets sat in the Orphans Shack, which had never looked less unpleasant than it did now. All five children were wearing the noisy shoes Violet had invented, so the territorial crabs were nowhere to be seen. The salt had dried up the dripping tan fungus into a hard beige crust that was not particularly attractive but at least did not *plop*! drops of fungus juice on the youngsters. Because the arrival of Coach Genghis had focused their energies on defeating his treachery, the five orphans hadn't done anything about the green walls with the pink hearts on them, but otherwise the Orphans Shack had become quite a bit less mountainous and quite a bit more molehilly since the Baudelaires' arrival. It still had a long way to go to be attractive and comfortable living quarters, but for thinking of a plan, it would do in a pinch.



And the Baudelaire children were certainly in a pinch. If Violet, Klaus, and Sunny spent one more exhausting night running laps, they would flunk their comprehensive exams and secretarial assignment, and then Coach Genghis would whisk them away from Prufrock Prep, and as they thought of this they could almost feel Genghis's bony fingers pinching the life right out of them. The Quagmire triplets were so worried about their friends that they felt pinched as well, even though they were not directly in danger—or so they thought, anyway.

"I can't believe we didn't figure out Coach Genghis's plan earlier," Isadora said mournfully, paging through her notebook. "Duncan and I did all this research, and we still didn't figure it out."

"Don't feel badly," Klaus said. "My sisters and I have had many encounters with Olaf, and it's always difficult to figure out his scheme."

"We were trying to find out the history of Count Olaf," Duncan said. "The Prufrock Preparatory library has a pretty good collection of old newspapers, and we thought if we could find out some of his other schemes, we might figure out this one."

"That's a good idea," Klaus said thoughtfully. "I've never tried that."

"We figured that Olaf must have been an evil man even before he met you," Duncan continued, "so we looked up things in old newspapers. But it was difficult to find too many articles, because as you know he always uses a different name. But we found a person matching his description in the *Bangkok Gazette*, who was arrested for strangling a bishop but escaped from prison in just ten minutes."

"That sounds like him, all right," Klaus said.

"And then in the *Verona Daily News*," Duncan said, "there was a man who had thrown a rich widow off of a cliff. He had a tattoo of an eye on his ankle, but he had eluded authorities. And then we found a newspaper from your hometown that said—"

“I don’t mean to interrupt,” Isadora said, “but we’d better stop thinking about the past and start thinking about the present. Lunchtime is more than half over, and we desperately need a plan.”

“You’re not napping, are you?” Klaus asked Violet, who had been silent for a very long time.

“Of course I’m not napping,” Violet replied. “I’m concentrating. I think I can invent something to make all those staples Sunny needs. But I can’t figure out how I can invent the device and study for the test at the same time. Since S.O.R.E. began, I haven’t taken good notes in Mr. Remora’s class, so I won’t be able to remember his stories.”

“Well, you don’t have to worry about that,” Duncan said, holding up his dark green notebook. “I’ve written down every one of Mr. Remora’s stories. Every boring detail is recorded here in my notebook.”

“And I’ve written down how long, wide, and deep all of Mrs. Bass’s objects are,” Isadora said, holding up her own notebook. “You can study from my notebook, Klaus, and Violet can study from Duncan’s.”

“Thank you,” Klaus said, “but you’re forgetting something. We’re supposed to be running laps this evening. We don’t have time to read anybody’s notebook.”

“Tarcour,” Sunny said, which meant “You’re right, of course. S.O.R.E. always lasts until dawn, and the tests are first thing in the morning.”

“If only we had one of the world’s great inventors to help us,” Violet said. “I wonder what Nikola Tesla would do.”

“Or one of the world’s great journalists,” Duncan said. “I wonder what Dorothy Parker would do in this situation.”

“And I wonder what Hammurabi, the ancient Babylonian, would do to help us,” Klaus said. “He was one of the world’s greatest researchers.”

“Or the great poet Lord Byron,” Isadora said.

“Shark,” Sunny said, rubbing her teeth thoughtfully.

“Who knows what any of those people or fish would do in our shoes?” Violet said. “It’s impossible to know.”

Duncan snapped his fingers, not to signal a waiter or because he was listening to catchy music but because he had an idea. “In our shoes!” he said. “That’s it!”

“What’s it?” Klaus asked. “How will our noisy shoes help?”

“No, no,” Duncan said. “Not the noisy shoes. I’m thinking about Coach Genghis’s expensive running shoes that he said he couldn’t take off because his feet were smelly.”

“And I bet they *are* smelly,” Isadora said. “I’ve noticed he doesn’t bathe much.”

“But that’s not why he wears them,” Violet said. “He wears them for a disguise.”

“Exactly!” Duncan said. “When you said ‘in your shoes,’ it gave me an idea. I know you just meant ‘in our shoes’ as an expression meaning ‘in our situation.’ But what if someone else were actually in your shoes—what if we disguised ourselves as you? Then we could run laps, and you could study for the comprehensive exams.”

“Disguise yourselves as us?” Klaus said. “You two look exactly like each other, but you don’t look anything like us.”

“So what?” Duncan said. “It’ll be dark tonight. When we’ve watched you from the archway, all we could see were two shadowy figures running—and one crawling.”

“That’s true,” Isadora said. “If I took the ribbon from your hair, Violet, and Duncan took Klaus’s glasses, we’d look enough like you that I bet Coach Genghis couldn’t tell.”

“And we could switch shoes, so your running on the grass would sound exactly the same,” Duncan said.

“But what about Sunny?” Violet asked. “There’s no way two people could disguise themselves as three people.”

The Quagmire triplets’ faces fell. “If only Quigley were here,” Duncan said. “I just know he’d be willing to dress up as a baby if it meant helping you.”

“What about a bag of flour?” Isadora asked. “Sunny’s only about as big as a bag of flour—nothing personal, Sunny.”

“Denada,” Sunny said, shrugging.

“We could snitch a bag from the cafeteria,” Isadora said, “and drag it alongside us as we ran. From a distance, it would probably look enough like Sunny to avoid suspicion.”

“Being in each other’s shoes seems like an extremely risky plan,” Violet said. “If it fails, not only are we in trouble but you are as well, and who knows what Coach Genghis will do to you?”

This, as it turns out, was a question that would haunt the Baudelaires for quite some time, but the Quagmires gave it barely a thought. “Don’t worry about that,” Duncan said. “The important thing is to keep you out of his clutches. It may be a risky plan, but being in each other’s shoes is the only thing we’ve been able to think of.”

“And we don’t have any time to waste thinking of anything else,” Isadora added. “We’d better hurry if we want to snitch the bag of flour and not be late for class.”

“And we’ll need a string, or something, so we can drag it along and make it look like Sunny crawling,” Duncan said.

“And I’ll need to snitch some things, too,” Violet said, “for my staple-making invention.”

“Nidop,” Sunny said, which meant something along the lines of “Then let’s get moving.”

The five children walked out of the Orphans Shack, taking off their noisy shoes and putting on their regular shoes so they wouldn’t make a lot of noise as they walked nervously across the lawn to the cafeteria. They were nervous because they were not supposed to be sneaking into the cafeteria, or snitching things, and they were nervous because their plan was indeed a risky one. It is not a pleasant feeling, nervousness, and I would not wish for small children to be any more nervous than the Baudelaires and the Quagmires were as they walked toward the cafeteria in their regular shoes. But I must say that the children weren’t nervous enough. They didn’t need to be more nervous about sneaking into the cafeteria, even though it was against the rules, or snitching things, even though they didn’t get caught. But they should have been more nervous about their plan, and about what would happen that evening when the sun set on the brown lawn and the luminous circle began to glow. They should have been nervous, now, in their regular shoes, about what would happen when they were in each other’s.

CHAPTER
Eleven

If you’ve ever dressed up for Halloween or attended a masquerade, you know that there is a certain thrill to wearing a disguise—a thrill that is half excitement and half danger. I once attended one of the famed masked balls hosted by the duchess of Winnipeg, and it was one of the most exciting and dangerous evenings of my life. I was disguised as a bullfighter and slipped into the party while being pursued by the palace guards, who were disguised as scorpions. The moment I entered the Grand Ballroom, I felt as if Lemony Snicket had disappeared. I was wearing clothes I had never worn before—a scarlet cape made of silk and a vest embroidered with gold thread and a skinny black mask—and it made me feel as if I were a different person. And because I felt like a different person, I dared to approach a woman I had been forbidden to approach for the rest of my life. She was alone on the veranda—the word “veranda” is a fancy term for a porch made of polished gray marble—and costumed as a dragonfly, with a glittering green mask and enormous silvery wings. As my pursuers scurried around the party, trying to guess which guest was me, I slipped out to the veranda and gave her the message I’d been trying to give her for fifteen long and lonely years. “Beatrice,” I cried, just as the scorpions spotted me, “Count Olaf is

I cannot go on. It makes me weep to think of that evening, and of the dark and desperate times that followed, and in the meantime I’m sure you are curious what happened to the Baudelaire orphans and the Quagmire triplets, after dinner that evening at Prufrock Prep.

“This is sort of exciting,” Duncan said, putting Klaus’s glasses on his face. “I know that we’re doing this for serious reasons, but I’m excited anyway.”

Isadora recited, tying Violet’s ribbon in her hair,

> *“It may not be particularly wise,*
> *but it’s a thrill to be disguised*.”

“That’s not a perfect poem, but it will have to do under the circumstances. How do we look?”

The Baudelaire orphans took a step back and regarded the Quagmires carefully. It was just after dinner, and the children were standing outside the Orphans Shack, hurriedly putting their risky plan into action. They had managed to sneak into the cafeteria and steal a Sunny-sized bag of flour from the kitchen while the metal-masked cafeteria workers’ backs were turned. Violet had also snitched a fork, a few teaspoons of creamed spinach, and a small potato, all of which she needed for her invention. Now they had just a few moments before the Baudelaires—or, in this case, the Quagmires in disguise—had to show up for S.O.R.E. Duncan and Isadora handed over their notebooks so the Baudelaires could study for their comprehensive exams, and switched shoes so the Quagmires’ laps would sound exactly like the Baudelaires’. Now, with only seconds to spare, the Baudelaires looked over the Quagmires’ disguise and realized instantly just how risky this plan was.

Isadora and Duncan Quagmire simply did not look very much like Violet and Klaus Baudelaire. Duncan's eyes were of a different color from Klaus's, and Isadora had different hair from Violet's, even if it was tied up in a similar way. Being triplets, the Quagmires were the exact same height, but Violet was taller than Klaus because she was older, and there was no time to make small stilts for Isadora to mimic this height difference. But it wasn't really these small physical details that made the disguise so unconvincing. It was the simple fact that the Baudelaires and the Quagmires were different people, and a hair ribbon, a pair of glasses, and some shoes couldn't turn them into one another any more than a woman disguised as a dragonfly can actually take wing and escape the disaster awaiting her.

"I know we don't look much like you," Duncan admitted after the Baudelaires had been quiet for some time. "But remember, it's quite dark on the front lawn. The only light is coming from the luminous circle. We'll make sure to keep our heads down when we're running, so our faces won't give us away. We won't speak a word to Coach Genghis, so our voices won't give us away. And we have your hair ribbon, glasses, and shoes, so our accessories won't give us away, either."

"We don't have to go through with this plan," Violet said quietly. "We appreciate your help, but we don't have to try and fool Genghis. My siblings and I could just run away right now, tonight. We've gotten to be pretty good runners, so we'd have a good head start on Coach Genghis."

"We could call Mr. Poe from a pay phone somewhere," Klaus said.

"Zubu," Sunny said, which meant "Or attend a different school, under different names."

"Those plans don't have a chance of working," Isadora said. "From what you've told us about Mr. Poe, he's never very helpful. And Count Olaf seems to find you wherever you go, so a different school wouldn't help, either."

"This is our only chance," Duncan agreed. "If you pass the exams without arousing Genghis's suspicion, you will be out of danger, and then we can focus our efforts on exposing the coach for who he really is."

"I suppose you're right," Violet said. "I just don't like the idea of your putting your lives in such danger, just to help us."

"What are friends for?" Isadora said. "We're not going to attend some silly recital while you run laps to your doom. You three were the first people at Prufrock Prep who weren't mean to us just for being orphans. None of us have any family, so we've got to stick together."

"At least let us go with you to the front lawn," Klaus said. "We'll spy on you from the archway, and make sure you're fooling Coach Genghis."

Duncan shook his head. "You don't have time to spy on us," he said. "You have to make staples out of those metal rods and study for two comprehensive exams."

"Oh!" Isadora said suddenly. "How will we drag this bag of flour along the track? We need a string or something."

"We could just kick it around the circle," Duncan said.

"No, no, no," Klaus said. "If Coach Genghis thinks you're kicking your baby sister, he'll know something is up."

"I know!" Violet said. She leaned forward and put her hand on Duncan's chest, running her fingers along his thick wool sweater until she found what she was looking for—a loose thread. Carefully, she pulled, unraveling the sweater slightly until she had a good long piece of yarn. Then she snapped it off and tied one end around the bag of flour. The other end she handed to Duncan. "This should do it," she said. "Sorry about your sweater."

"I'm sure you can invent a sewing machine," he said, "when we're all out of danger. Well, we'd better go, Isadora. Coach Genghis will be waiting. Good luck with studying."

"Good luck with running laps," Klaus said.

The Baudelaires took a long look at their friends. They were reminded of the last time they saw their parents, waving good-bye to them as they left for the beach. They had not known, of course, that it would be the last moment they would spend with their mother and father, and again and again, each of the Baudelaires had gone back to that day in their lives, wishing that they had said something more than a casual good-bye. Violet, Klaus, and Sunny looked at the two triplets and hoped that this was not such a time, a time when people they cared for would disappear from their lives forever. But what if it were?

“If we never see—” Violet stopped, swallowed, and began again. “If something goes wrong—”

Duncan took Violet’s hands and looked right at her. Violet saw, behind Klaus’s glasses, the serious look in Duncan’s wide eyes. “Nothing will go wrong,” he said firmly, though of course he was wrong at that very moment. “Nothing will go wrong at all. We’ll see you in the morning, Baudelaires.”

Isadora nodded solemnly and followed her brother and the bag of flour away from the Orphans Shack. The Baudelaire orphans watched them walk toward the front lawn until the triplets were merely two specks, dragging another speck along with them.

“You know,” Klaus said, as they watched them, “from a distance, in the dim light, they look quite a bit like us.”

“Abax,” Sunny agreed.

“I hope so,” Violet murmured. “I hope so. But in the meantime, we’d better stop thinking about them and get started on our half of the plan. Let’s put our noisy shoes on and go into the shack.”

“I can’t imagine how you’re going to make staples,” Klaus said, “with only a fork, a few teaspoons of creamed spinach, and a small potato. That sounds more like the ingredients for a side dish than for a staple-making device. I hope your inventing skills haven’t been dulled by a lack of sleep.”

“I don’t think they have,” Violet said. “It’s amazing how much energy you can have once you have a plan. Besides, my plan doesn’t only involve the things I snitched. It involves one of the Orphan Shack crabs and our noisy shoes. Now, when we all have our shoes on, please follow my instructions.”

The two younger Baudelaires were quite puzzled at this, but they had learned long ago that when it came to inventions, Violet could be trusted absolutely. In the recent past, she had invented a grappling hook, a lockpick, and a signaling device, and now, come hell or high water—an expression which here means “using a fork, a few teaspoons of creamed spinach, a small potato, a live crab, and noisy shoes”—she was going to invent a staple-making device.

The three siblings put on their shoes and, following Violet’s instructions, entered the shack. As usual, the tiny crabs were lounging around, taking advantage of their time alone in the shack when they wouldn’t be frightened by loud noises. On most occasions, the Baudelaires would stomp wildly on the floor when they entered the shack, and the crabs would scurry underneath the bales of hay and into other hiding places in the room. This time, however, Violet instructed her siblings to step on the floor in carefully arranged patterns, so as to herd one of the grumpiest and biggest-clawed crabs into a corner of the shack. While the other crabs scattered, this crab was trapped in a corner, afraid of the noisy shoes but with nowhere to hide from them.

“Good work!” Violet cried. “Keep him in the corner, Sunny, while I ready the potato.”

“What is the potato for?” Klaus asked.

“As we know,” Violet explained as Sunny tapped her little feet this way and that to keep the crab in the corner, “these crabs love to get their claws on our toes. I specifically snitched a potato that was toe-shaped. You see how it’s curved in a sort of oval way, and the little bumpy part here looks like a toenail?”

“You’re right,” Klaus said. “The resemblance is remarkable. But what does it have to do with staples?”

“Well, the metal rods that Nero gave us are very long, and need to be cut cleanly into small, staple-sized pieces. While Sunny keeps the crab in the corner, I’m going to wave the potato at him. He—or she, come to think of it, I don’t know how to tell a boy crab from a girl crab—”

“It’s a boy,” Klaus said. “Trust me.”

“Well, he’ll think it’s a toe,” Violet continued, “and snap at it with his claws. At that instant, I’ll yank the potato away and put a rod in its place. If I do it carefully enough, the crab should do a perfect job of slicing it up.”

“And then what?” Klaus asked.

“First things first,” Violet replied firmly. “O.K. Sunny, keep tapping those noisy shoes. I’m ready with the potato and rod number one.”

“What can I do?” Klaus asked.

“You can start studying for the comprehensive exam, of course,” Violet said. “I couldn’t possibly read all of Duncan’s notes in just one night. While Sunny and I make the staples, you need to read Duncan’s and Isadora’s notebooks, memorize the measurements from Mrs. Bass’s class, and teach me all of Mr. Remora’s stories.”

“Roger,” Klaus said. As you probably know, the middle Baudelaire was not referring to anybody named Roger. He was saying a man’s name to indicate that he understood what Violet had said and would act accordingly, and over the course of the next two hours, that’s exactly what he did. While Sunny used her noisy shoes to keep the crab in the corner and Violet used the potato as a toe and the crab’s claws as clean cutters, Klaus used the Quagmire notebooks to study for the comprehensive exams, and everything worked the way it should. Sunny tapped her shoes so noisily that the crab remained trapped. Violet was so quick with the potato and metal rods that soon they were snipped into staple-sized pieces. And Klaus—although he had to squint because Duncan was using his glasses—read Isadora’s measuring notes so carefully that before long he had memorized the length, width, and depth of just about everything.

“Violet, ask me the measurements of the navy blue scarf,” Klaus said, turning the notebook over so he couldn’t peek.

Violet yanked the potato away just in time, and the crab snipped off another bit of the metal rods. “What are the measurements of the navy blue scarf?” she asked.

“Two decimeters long,” Klaus recited, “nine centimeters wide, and four millimeters thick. It’s boring, but it’s correct. Sunny, ask me the measurements of the bar of deodorant soap.”

The crab saw an opportunity to leave the corner, but Sunny was too quick for it. “Soap?” Sunny quizzed Klaus, tapping her tiny noisy shoes until the crab retreated.

“Eight centimeters by eight centimeters by eight centimeters,” Klaus said promptly. “That one’s easy. You’re doing great, you two. I bet that crab’s going to be almost as tired as we are.”

“No,” Violet said, “he’s done. Let him go, Sunny. We have all the staple-sized pieces we need. I’m glad that part of the staple-making process is over. It’s very nerve-wracking to tease a crab.”

“What’s next?” Klaus said, as the crab scurried away from the most frightening moments of his life.

“Next you teach me Mr. Remora’s stories,” Violet said, “while Sunny and I bend these little bits of metal into the proper shape.”

“Shablo,” Sunny said, which meant something like “How are we going to do that?”

“Watch,” Violet said, and Sunny watched. While Klaus closed Isadora’s black notebook and began paging through Duncan’s dark green one, Violet took the glob of creamed spinach and mixed it with a few pieces of stray hay and dust until it was a sticky, gluey mess. Then she placed this mess on the spiky end of the fork, and stuck it to one of the bales of hay so the handle end of the fork hung over the side. She blew on the creamed-spinach-stray-hay-and-dust mixture until it hardened. “I always thought that Prufrock Prep’s creamed spinach was awfully sticky,” Violet explained, “and then I realized it could be used as glue. And now, we have a perfect method of making those tiny strips into staples. See, if I lay a strip across the handle of the fork, a tiny part of the strip hangs off each of the sides. Those are the parts that will go inside the paper when it’s a staple. If I take off my noisy shoes”—and here Violet paused to take off her noisy shoes—“and use the metal ends to tap on the strips, they’ll bend around the handle of the fork and turn into staples. See?”

“Gyba!” Sunny shrieked. She meant “You’re a genius! But what can I do to help?”

“You can keep your noisy shoes on your feet,” Violet replied, “and keep the crabs away from us. And Klaus, you start summarizing stories.”

“Roger,” Sunny said.

“Roger,” Klaus said, and once again, neither of them were referring to Roger. They meant, once again, that they understood what Violet had said, and would act accordingly, and all three Baudelaires acted accordingly for the rest of the night. Violet tapped away at the metal strips, and Klaus read out loud from Duncan’s notebook, and Sunny stomped her noisy shoes. Soon, the Baudelaires had a pile of homemade staples on the floor, the details of Mr. Remora’s stories in their brains, and not a single crab bothering them in the shack, and even with the threat of Coach Genghis hovering over them, the evening actually began to feel rather cozy. It reminded the Baudelaires of evenings they had spent when their parents were alive, in one of the living rooms in the Baudelaire mansion. Violet would often be tinkering away at some invention, while Klaus would often be reading and sharing the information he was learning, and Sunny would often be making loud noises. Of course, Violet was never tinkering frantically at an invention that would save their lives, Klaus was never reading something so boring, and Sunny was never making loud noises to scare crabs, but nevertheless as the night wore on, the Baudelaires felt almost at home in the Orphans Shack. And when the sky began to lighten with the first rays of dawn, the Baudelaires began to feel a certain thrill that was quite different from the thrill of being in disguise. It was a thrill that I have never felt in my life, and it was a thrill that the Baudelaires did not feel very often. But as the morning sun began to shine, the Baudelaire orphans felt the thrill of thinking your plan might work after all, and that perhaps they would eventually be as safe and happy as the evenings they remembered.

CHAPTER
Twelve

Assumptions are dangerous things to make, and like all dangerous things to make—bombs, for instance, or strawberry shortcake—if you make even the tiniest mistake you can find yourself in terrible trouble. Making assumptions simply means believing things are a certain way with little or no evidence that shows you are correct, and you can see at once how this can lead to terrible trouble. For instance, one morning you might wake up and make the assumption that your bed was in the same place that it always was, even though you would have no real evidence that this was so. But when you got out of your bed, you might discover that it had floated out to sea, and now you would be in terrible trouble all because of the incorrect assumption that you'd made. You can see that it is better not to make too many assumptions, particularly in the morning.

The morning of the comprehensive exams, however, the Baudelaire orphans were so tired, not only from staying up all night studying and making staples but also from nine consecutive nights of running laps, that they made plenty of assumptions, and every last one of them turned out to be incorrect.

"Well, that's the last staple," Violet said, stretching her tired muscles. "I think we can safely assume that Sunny won't lose her job."

"And you seem to know every detail of Mr. Remora's stories as well as I know all of Mrs. Bass's measurements," Klaus said, rubbing his tired eyes, "so I think we can safely assume that we won't be expelled."

"Nilikoh," Sunny said, yawning her tired mouth. She meant something like "And we haven't seen either of the Quagmire triplets, so I think we can safely assume that their part of the plan went well."

"That's true," Klaus said. "I assume if they'd been caught we would have heard by now."

"I'd make the same assumption," Violet said.

"*I'd make the same assumption*," came a nasty, mimicking voice, and the children were startled to see Vice Principal Nero standing behind them holding a huge stack of papers. In addition to the assumptions they had made out loud, the Baudelaires had made the assumption that they were alone, and they were surprised to find not only Vice Principal Nero but also Mr. Remora and Mrs. Bass waiting in the doorway of the Orphans Shack. "I hope you've been studying all evening," Nero said, "because I told your teachers to make these exams extra-challenging, and the pieces of paper that the baby has to staple are very thick. Well, let's get started. Mr. Remora and Mrs. Bass will take turns asking you questions until one of you gets an answer wrong, and then you flunk. Sunny will sit in the back and staple these papers into booklets of five papers each, and if your homemade staples don’t work perfectly, then *you* flunk. Well, a musical genius like myself doesn’t have all day to oversee exams. I’ve missed too much practice time as it is. Let’s begin!”

Nero threw the papers into a big heap on one of the bales of hay, and the stapler right after it. Sunny crawled over as quickly as she could and began inserting the staples into the stapler, and Klaus stood up, still clutching the Quagmire notebooks. Violet put her noisy shoes back on her feet, and Mr. Remora swallowed a bite of banana and asked his first question.

“In my story about the donkey,” he said, “how many miles did the donkey run?”

“Six,” Violet said promptly.

“*Six*,” Nero mimicked. “That can’t be correct, can it, Mr. Remora?”

“Um, yes, actually,” Mr. Remora said, taking another bite of banana.

“How wide,” Mrs. Bass said to Klaus, “was the book with the yellow cover?”

“Nineteen centimeters,” Klaus said immediately.

“*Nineteen centimeters*,” Nero mocked. “That’s wrong, isn’t it, Mrs. Bass?”

“No,” Mrs. Bass admitted. “That’s the right answer.”

“Well, try another question, Mr. Remora,” Nero said.

“In my story about the mushroom,” Mr. Remora asked Violet, “what was the name of the chef?”

“Maurice,” Violet answered.

“*Maurice*,” Nero mimicked.

“Correct,” Mr. Remora said.

“How long was chicken breast number seven?” Mrs. Bass asked.

“Fourteen centimeters and five millimeters,” Klaus said.

“*Fourteen centimeters and five millimeters,*” Nero mimicked.

“That’s right,” Mrs. Bass said. “You’re actually both very good students, even if you’ve been sleeping through class lately.”

“Stop all this chitchat and flunk them,” Nero said. “I’ve never gotten to expel any students, and I’m really looking forward to it.”

“In my story about the dump truck,” Mr. Remora said, as Sunny began to staple the pile of thick papers into booklets, “what color were the rocks that it carried?”

“Gray and brown.”

“*Gray and brown*.”

“Correct.”

“How deep was my mother’s casserole dish?”

“Six centimeters.”

“*Six centimeters*.”

“Correct.”

“In my story about the weasel, what was its favorite color?”

The comprehensive exams went on and on, and if I were to repeat all of the tiresome and pointless questions that Mr. Remora and Mrs. Bass asked, you might become so bored that you might go to sleep right here, using this book as a pillow instead of as an entertaining and instructive tale to benefit young minds. Indeed, the exams were so boring that the Baudelaire orphans might normally have dozed through the test themselves. But they dared not doze. One wrong answer or unstapled piece of paper, and Nero would expel them from Prufrock Preparatory School and send them into the waiting clutches of Coach Genghis, so the three children worked as hard as they could. Violet tried to remember each detail Klaus had taught her, Klaus tried to remember every measurement he had taught himself, and Sunny stapled like mad, a phrase which here means "quickly and accurately." Finally, Mr. Remora stopped in the middle of his eighth banana and turned to Vice Principal Nero.

"Nero," he said, "there's no use continuing these exams. Violet is a very fine student, and has obviously studied very hard."

Mrs. Bass nodded her head in agreement. "In all my years of teaching, I've never encountered a more metric-wise boy than Klaus, here. And it looks like Sunny is a fine secretary as well. Look at these booklets! They're gorgeous."

"Pilso!" Sunny shrieked.

"My sister means 'Thank you very much,'" Violet said, although Sunny really meant something more like "My stapling hand is sore." "Does this mean we get to stay at Prufrock Prep?"

"Oh, let them stay, Nero," Mr. Remora said. "Why don't you expel that Carmelita Spats? She never studies, and she's an awful person besides."

"Oh yes," Mrs. Bass said. "Let's give *her* an extra-challenging examination."

"I can't flunk Carmelita Spats," Nero said impatiently. "She's Coach Genghis's Special Messenger."

"Who?" Mr. Remora asked.

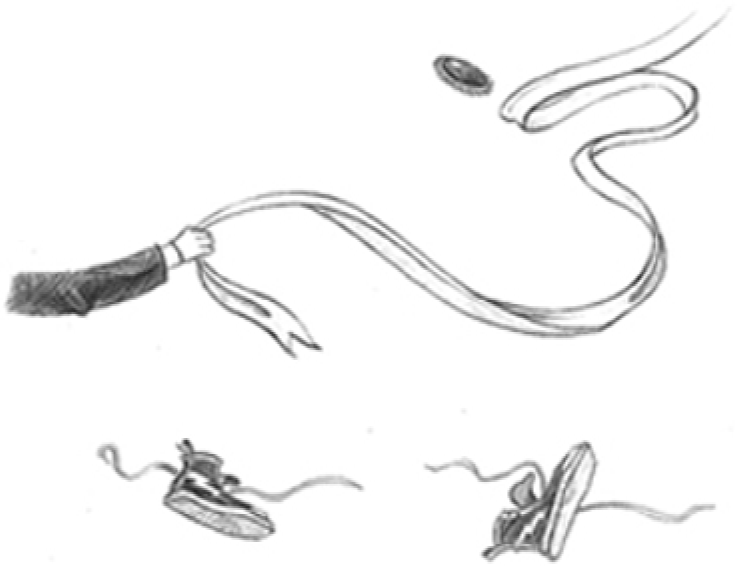
"You know," Mrs. Bass explained, "Coach Genghis, the new gym teacher."

"Oh yes," Mr. Remora said. "I've heard about him, but never met him. What is he like?"

“He’s the finest gym teacher the world has ever seen,” Vice Principal Nero said, shaking his four pigtails in amazement. “But you don’t have to take my word for it. You can see for yourself. Here he comes now.”

Nero pointed one of his hairy hands out of the Orphans Shack, and the Baudelaire orphans saw with horror that the vice principal was speaking the truth. Whistling an irritating tune to himself, Coach Genghis was walking straight toward them, and the children could see at once how incorrect one of their assumptions had been. It was not the assumption that Sunny would not lose her job, although that assumption, too, would turn out to be incorrect. And it was not the assumption that Violet and Klaus would not be expelled, although that, too, was a wrong one. It was the assumption about the Quagmire triplets and their part of the plan going well. As Coach Genghis walked closer and closer, the Baudelaires saw that he was holding Violet’s hair ribbon in one of his scraggly hands and Klaus’s glasses in the other, and with every step of his expensive running shoes, the coach raised a small white cloud, which the children realized must be flour from the snitched sack. But more than the ribbon, or the glasses, or the small clouds of flour was the look in Genghis’s eyes. As Coach Genghis reached the Orphans Shack, his eyes were shining bright with triumph, as if he had finally won a game that he had been playing for a long, long time, and the Baudelaire orphans realized that the assumption about the Quagmire triplets had been very, very wrong indeed.

CHAPTER
Thirteen



"*Where* are they?" Violet cried as Coach Genghis stepped into the shack. "What have you done with them?" Normally, of course, one should begin conversations with something more along the lines of "Hello, how are you," but the eldest Baudelaire was far too distressed to do so.

Genghis's eyes were shining as brightly as could be, but his voice was calm and pleasant. "Here they are," he said, holding up the ribbon and glasses. "I thought you might be worried about them, so I brought them over first thing in the morning."

"We don't mean *these* them!" Klaus said, taking the items from Genghis's scraggly hands. "We mean *them* them!"

"I'm afraid I don't understand all those thems," Coach Genghis said, shrugging at the adults. "The orphans ran laps last night as part of my

S.O.R.E. program, but they had to dash off in the morning to take their exams. In their hurry, Violet dropped her ribbon and Klaus dropped his glasses. But the baby—"

"You know very well that's not what happened," Violet interrupted. "Where are the Quagmire triplets? What have you done with our friends?"

"*What have you done with our friends*?" Vice Principal Nero said in his mocking tone. "Stop talking nonsense, orphans."

"I'm afraid it's not nonsense," Genghis said, shaking his turbaned head and continuing his story. "As I was saying before the little girl interrupted me, the baby didn't dash off with the other orphans. She just sat there like a sack of flour. So I walked over to her and gave her a kick to get her moving."

"Excellent idea!" Nero said. "What a wonderful story this is! And then what happened?"

"Well, at first it seemed like I'd kicked a big hole in the baby," Genghis said, his eyes shining, "which seemed lucky, because Sunny was a terrible athlete and it would have been a blessing to put her out of her misery."

Nero clapped his hands. "I know just what you mean, Genghis," he said. "She's a terrible secretary as well."

"But she did all that stapling," Mr. Remora protested.

"Shut up and let the coach finish his story," Nero said.

"But when I looked down," Genghis continued, "I saw that I hadn't kicked a hole in a baby. I'd kicked a hole in a bag of flour! I'd been tricked!"

"That's terrible!" Nero cried.

"So I ran after Violet and Klaus," Genghis continued, "and I found that they weren't Violet and Klaus after all, but those two other orphans—the twins."

“They’re not twins!” Violet cried. “They’re triplets!”

“*They’re triplets*!” Nero mocked. “Don’t be an idiot. Triplets are when four babies are born at the same time, and there are only two Quagmires.”

“And these two Quagmires were pretending to be the Baudelaires, in order to give the Baudelaires extra time to study.”

“Extra time to study?” Nero said, grinning in delight. “Hee hee hee! Why, that’s cheating!”

“That’s not cheating!” Mrs. Bass said.

“Skipping gym class to study is cheating,” Nero insisted.

“No, it’s just good time management,” Mr. Remora argued. “There’s nothing wrong with athletics, but they shouldn’t get in the way of your schoolwork.”

“Look, I’m the vice principal,” the vice principal said. “I say the Baudelaires were cheating, and therefore—hooray!—I can expel them. You two are merely teachers, so if you disagree with me, I can expel you, too.”

Mr. Remora looked at Mrs. Bass, and they both shrugged. “You’re the boss, Nero,” Mr. Remora said finally, taking another banana out of his pocket. “If you say they’re expelled, they’re expelled.”

“Well, I say they’re expelled,” Nero said. “And Sunny loses her job, too.”

“Rantaw!” Sunny shrieked, which meant something along the lines of “I never wanted to work as a secretary, anyway!”

“We don’t care about being expelled,” Violet said. “We want to know what happened to our friends.”

“Well, the Quagmires had to be punished for their part in the cheating,” Coach Genghis said, “so I brought them over to the cafeteria and put those two workers in charge of them. They’ll be whisking eggs all day long.”

“Very sensible,” Nero agreed.

“That’s all they’re doing?” Klaus said suspiciously. “Whisking eggs?”

“That’s what I said,” Genghis said and leaned so close to the Baudelaires that all they could see were his shiny eyes and the crooked curve of his wicked mouth. “Those two Quagmires will whisk and whisk until they are simply whisked away.”

“You’re a liar,” Violet said.

“Insulting your coach,” Nero said, shaking his pigtailed head. “Now you’re doubly expelled.”

“What’s this?” said a voice from the doorway. “Doubly expelled?”

The voice stopped to have a long, wet cough, so the Baudelaires knew without looking that it was Mr. Poe. He was standing at the Orphans Shack holding a large paper sack and looking busy and confused. “What are all of you doing here?” he said. “This doesn’t look like a proper place to have a conversation. It’s just an old shack.”

“What are *you* doing here?” Nero asked. “We don’t allow strangers to wander around Prufrock Preparatory School.”

“Poe’s the name,” Mr. Poe said, shaking Nero’s hand. “You must be Nero. We’ve talked on the phone. I received your telegram about the twenty-eight bags of candy and the ten pairs of earrings with precious stones. My associates at Mulctuary Money Management thought I’d better deliver them in person, so here I am. But what’s this about expelled?”

“These orphans you foisted on me,” Nero said, using a nasty word for “gave,” “have proven to be terrible cheaters, and I’m forced to expel them.”

“Cheaters?” Mr. Poe said, frowning at the three siblings. “Violet, Klaus, Sunny, I’m very disappointed in you. You promised me that you’d be excellent students.”

“Well, actually, only Violet and Klaus were students,” Nero said. “Sunny was an administrative assistant, but she was terrible at it as well.”

Mr. Poe’s eyes widened in surprise as he paused to cough into his white handkerchief. “An administrative assistant?” he repeated. “Why, Sunny’s only a baby. She should be in preschool, not an office environment.”

“Well, it doesn’t matter now,” Nero said. “They’re all expelled. Give me that candy.”

Klaus looked down at his hands, which were still clutching the Quagmire notebooks. He was afraid that the notebooks might be the only sign of the Quagmires he would ever see again. “We don’t have any time to argue about candy!” he cried. “Count Olaf has done something terrible to our friends!”

“Count Olaf?” Mr. Poe said, handing Nero the paper sack. “Don’t tell me he’s found you here!”

“No, of course not,” Nero said. “My advanced computer system has kept him away, of course. But the children have this bizarre notion that Coach Genghis is actually Olaf in disguise.”

“Count Olaf,” Genghis said slowly. “Yes, I’ve heard of him. He’s supposed to be the best actor in the whole world. I’m the best gym teacher in the whole world, so we couldn’t possibly be the same person.”

Mr. Poe looked Coach Genghis up and down, then shook his hand. “A pleasure to meet you,” he said, and then turned to the Baudelaires. “Children, I’m surprised at you. Even without an advanced computer system, you should be able to tell that this man isn’t Count Olaf. Olaf has only one eyebrow, and this man is wearing a turban. And Olaf has a tattoo of an eye on his ankle, and this man is wearing expensive running shoes. They are quite handsome, by the way.”

“Oh, thank you,” Coach Genghis said. “Unfortunately, thanks to these children, they have flour all over them, but I’m sure it’ll wash off.”

“If he removes his turban and his shoes,” Violet said impatiently, “you will be able to see that he’s Olaf.”

“We’ve been through this before,” Nero said. “He can’t take off his running shoes because he’s been exercising and his feet smell.”

“And I can’t take off my turban for religious reasons,” Genghis added.

“You’re not wearing a turban for religious reasons!” Klaus said in disgust, and Sunny shrieked something in agreement. “You’re wearing it as a disguise! Please, Mr. Poe, make him take it off!”

“Now, Klaus,” Mr. Poe said sternly. “You have to learn to be accepting of other cultures. I’m sorry, Coach Genghis. The children aren’t usually prejudiced.”

“That’s quite all right,” Genghis said. “I’m used to religious persecution.”

“However,” Mr. Poe continued, after a brief coughing spell, “I would ask you to remove your running shoes, if only to set the Baudelaires’ minds at ease. I think we can all stand a little smelliness if it’s in the cause of criminal justice.”

“Smelly feet,” Mrs. Bass said, wrinkling her nose. “Ew, gross.”

“I’m afraid I cannot take off my running shoes,” Coach Genghis said, taking a step toward the door. “I need them.”

“Need them?” Nero asked. “For what?”

Coach Genghis took a long, long look at the three Baudelaires and smiled a terrible, toothy grin. “For running, of course,” he said, and ran out the door.

The orphans were startled for a moment, not only because he had started running so suddenly but also because it seemed like he had given up so easily. After his long, elaborate plan—disguising himself as a gym teacher, forcing the Baudelaires to run laps, getting them expelled—he was suddenly racing across the lawn without even glancing back at the children he'd been chasing for such a long time. The Baudelaires stepped out of the Orphans Shack, and Coach Genghis turned back to sneer at them.

"Don't think I've given up on *you*, orphans!" he called to them. "But in the meantime, I have two little prisoners with a very nice fortune of their own!"

He began to run again, but not before pointing a bony finger across the lawn. The Baudelaires gasped. At the far end of Prufrock Prep, they saw a long, black car with dark smoke billowing out of its exhaust pipes. But the children were not gasping at air pollution. The two cafeteria workers were walking toward the car, but they had taken off their metal masks at last, and the three youngsters could see that they were the two powder-faced women who were comrades of Count Olaf's. But this was not what the children were gasping at either, although it was a surprising and distressing turn of events. What they were gasping at was what each of the women was dragging toward the car. Each powder-faced woman was dragging one of the Quagmire triplets, who were struggling desperately to get away.

"Put them in the back seat!" Genghis called. "I'll drive! Hurry!"

"What in the world is Coach Genghis doing with those children?" Mr. Poe asked, frowning.

The Baudelaires did not even turn to Mr. Poe to try and explain. After all their S.O.R.E. training sessions, Violet, Klaus, and Sunny found that their leg muscles could respond instantly if they wanted to run. And the Baudelaire orphans had never wanted to run more than they did now.

"After them!" Violet cried, and the children went after them. Violet ran, her hair flying wildly behind her. Klaus ran, not even bothering to drop the Quagmire notebooks. And Sunny crawled as fast as her legs and hands could carry her. Mr. Poe gave a startled cough and began running after them, and Nero, Mr. Remora, and Mrs. Bass began running after Mr. Poe. If you had been hiding behind the archway, spying on what was going on, you would have seen what looked like a strange race on the front lawn, with Coach Genghis running in front, the Baudelaire orphans right behind, and assorted adults huffing and puffing behind the children. But if you continued watching, you would have seen an exciting development in the race, a phrase which here means that the Baudelaires were gaining on Genghis. The coach had much longer legs than the Baudelaires, of course, but he had spent the last ten nights standing around blowing a whistle. The children had spent those nights running hundreds of laps around the luminous circle, and so their tiny, strong legs—and, in Sunny's case, arms—were overcoming Genghis's height advantage.

I hate to pause at such a suspenseful part of the story, but I feel I must intrude and give you one last warning as we reach the end of this miserable tale. You were probably thinking, as you read that the children were catching up to their enemy, that perhaps this was the time in the lives of the Baudelaire orphans when this terrible villain would finally be caught, and that perhaps the children would find some kind guardians and that Violet, Klaus, and Sunny would spend the rest of their lives in relative happiness, possibly creating the printing business that they had discussed with the Quagmires. And you are free to believe that this is how the story turns out, if you want. The last few events in this chapter of the Baudelaire orphans' lives are incredibly unfortunate, and quite terrifying, and so if you would prefer to ignore them entirely you should put this book down now and think of a gentle ending to this horrible story. I have made a solemn promise to write the Baudelaire history exactly as it occurred, but you have made no such promise—at least as far as I know—and you do not need to endure the wretched ending of this story, and this is your very last chance to save yourself from the woeful knowledge of what happened next.

Violet was the first to reach Coach Genghis, and she stretched her arm out as far as she could, grabbing part of his turban. Turbans, you probably know, consist of just one piece of cloth, wrapped very tightly and in a complicated way around someone's head. But Genghis had cheated, not knowing the proper way to tie a turban, because he was wearing it as a disguise and not for religious reasons. He had merely wrapped it around his head the way you might wrap a towel around yourself when getting out of the shower, so when Violet grabbed the turban, it unraveled immediately. She had been hoping that grabbing his turban would stop the coach from running, but all it did was leave her with a long piece of cloth in her hands.

Coach Genghis kept running, his one eyebrow glistened with sweat over his shiny eyes.

"Look!" Mr. Poe said, who was far behind the Baudelaires but close enough to see. "Genghis has only one eyebrow, like Count Olaf!"

Sunny was the next Baudelaire to reach Genghis, and because she was crawling on the ground, she was in a perfect position to attack his shoes. Using all four of her sharp teeth, she bit one pair of his shoelaces, and then the other. The knots came undone immediately, leaving tiny, bitten pieces of shoelace on the brown lawn. Sunny had been hoping that untying his shoes would make the coach trip, but Genghis merely stepped out of his shoes and kept running. Like many disgusting people, Coach Genghis was not wearing socks, so with each step his eye tattoo glistening with sweat on his left ankle.

"Look!" Mr. Poe said, who was still too far to help but close enough to see. "Genghis has an eye tattoo, like Count Olaf! In fact, I think he *is* Count Olaf!"

"Of course he is!" Violet cried, holding up the unraveled turban.

"Merd!" Sunny shrieked, holding up a tiny piece of shoelace. She meant something like "That's what we've been trying to tell you."

Klaus, however, did not say anything. He was putting all of his energy toward running, but he was not running toward the man we can finally call by his true name, Count Olaf. Klaus was running toward the car. The powder-faced women were just shoving the Quagmires into the back seat, and he knew this might be his only chance to rescue them.

"Klaus! Klaus!" Isadora cried as he reached the car. Klaus dropped the notebooks to the ground and grabbed his friend's hand. "Help us!"

"Hang on!" Klaus cried and began to drag Isadora back out of the car. Without a word, one of the powder-faced women leaned forward and bit Klaus's hand, forcing him to let go of the triplet. The other powder-faced woman leaned across Isadora's lap and began pulling the car door closed.

“No!” Klaus cried and grabbed the door handle. Back and forth, Klaus and Olaf’s associate tugged on the door, forcing it halfway open and halfway shut.

“Klaus!” Duncan cried, from behind Isadora. “Listen to me, Klaus! If anything goes wrong—”

“Nothing will go wrong,” Klaus promised, pulling on the car door as hard as he could. “You’ll be out of here in a second!”

“If anything goes wrong,” Duncan said again, “there’s something you should know. When we were researching the history of Count Olaf, we found out something dreadful!”

“We can talk about this later,” Klaus said, struggling with the door.

“Look in the notebooks!” Isadora cried. “The—” The first powder-faced woman put her hand over Isadora’s mouth so she couldn’t speak. Isadora turned her head roughly and slipped from the woman’s grasp. “The—” The powdery hand covered her mouth again.

“Hang on!” Klaus called desperately. “Hang on!”

“Look in the notebooks! V.F.D.” Duncan screamed, but the other woman’s powdery hand covered his mouth before he could continue.

“What?” Klaus said.

Duncan shook his head vigorously and freed himself from the woman’s hand for just one moment. “V.F.D.” he managed to scream again, and that was the last Klaus heard. Count Olaf, who had been running slower without his shoes, had reached the car, and with a deafening roar, he grabbed Klaus’s hand and pried it loose from the car door. As the door slammed shut, Olaf kicked Klaus in the stomach, sending him falling to the ground and landing with a rough *thump*! near the Quagmire notebooks he had dropped. The villain towered over Klaus and gave him a sickening smile, then leaned down, picked up the notebooks, and tucked them under his arm.

"No!" Klaus screamed, but Count Olaf merely smiled, stepped into the front seat, and began driving away just as Violet and Sunny reached their brother.

Clutching his stomach, Klaus stood up and tried to follow his sisters, who were trying to chase the long, black car. But Olaf was driving over the speed limit and it was simply impossible, and after a few yards the Baudelaires had to stop. The Quagmire triplets climbed over the powder-faced women and began to pound on the rear window of the car. Violet, Klaus, and Sunny could not hear what the Quagmires were screaming through the glass; they only saw their desperate and terrified faces. But then the powdery hands of Olaf's assistants grabbed them and pulled them back from the window. The faces of the Quagmire triplets faded to nothing, and the Baudelaires saw nothing more as the car pulled away.

"We have to go after them!" Violet screamed, her face streaked with tears. She turned around to face Nero and Mr. Poe, who were pausing for breath on the edge of the lawn. "We have to go after them!"

"We'll call the police," Mr. Poe gasped, wiping his sweaty forehead with his handkerchief. "They have an advanced computer system, too. They'll catch him. Where's the nearest phone, Nero?"

"You can't use my phone, Poe!" Nero said. "You brought three terrible cheaters here, and now, thanks to you, my greatest gym teacher is gone and took two students with him! The Baudelaires are triple-expelled!"

"Now see here, Nero," Poe said. "Be reasonable."

The Baudelaires sunk to the brown lawn, weeping with frustration and exhaustion. They paid no attention to the argument between Vice Principal Nero and Mr. Poe, because they knew, from the prism of their experience, that by the time the adults had decided on a course of action, Count Olaf would be long gone. This time, Olaf had not merely escaped but escaped with friends of theirs, and the Baudelaires wept as they thought they might never see the triplets again. They were wrong about this, but they had no way of knowing they were wrong, and just imagining what Count Olaf might do to their dear friends made them only weep harder. Violet wept, thinking of how kind the Quagmires had been to her and her siblings upon the Baudelaires' arrival at this dreadful academy. Klaus wept, thinking of how the Quagmires had risked their lives to help him and his sisters escape from Olaf's clutches. And Sunny wept, thinking of the research the Quagmires had done, and the information they hadn't had time to share with her and her siblings.

The Baudelaire orphans hung on to one another, and wept and wept while the adults argued endlessly behind them. Finally—as, I'm sorry to say, Count Olaf forced the Quagmires into puppy costumes so he could sneak them onto the airplane without anyone noticing—the Baudelaires cried themselves out and just sat on the lawn together in weary silence. They looked up at the smooth gray stone of the tombstone buildings and at the arch with "PRUFROCK PREPARATORY SCHOOL" in enormous black letters and the motto "Memento Mori" printed beneath. They looked out at the edge of the lawn, where Olaf had snatched the Quagmire notebooks. And they took long, long looks at one another. The Baudelaires remembered, as I'm sure you remembered, that in times of extreme stress one can find energy hidden in even the most exhausted areas of the body, and Violet, Klaus, and Sunny felt that energy surge through them now.

"What did Duncan shout to you?" Violet asked. "What did he shout to you from the car, about what was in the notebooks?"

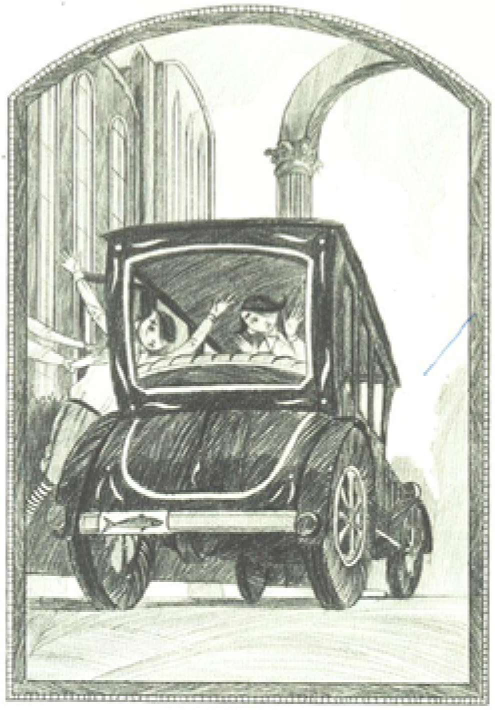
"V.F.D." Klaus said, "but I don't know what it means."

"Ceju," Sunny said, which meant "We have to find out."

The older Baudelaires looked at their sister and nodded. Sunny was right. The children had to find out the secret of V.F.D. and the dreadful thing the Quagmires had discovered. Perhaps it could help them rescue the two triplets. Perhaps it could bring Count Olaf to justice. And perhaps it could somehow make clear the mysterious and deadly way that their lives had become so unfortunate.

A morning breeze blew through the campus of Prufrock Preparatory School, rustling the brown lawn and knocking against the stone arch with the motto printed on it. "Memento Mori"—"Remember you will die." The

Baudelaire orphans looked up at the motto and vowed that before they died, they would solve this dark and complicated mystery that cast a shadow over their lives.



To My Kind Editor,

Please excuse this ridiculously fancy stationery. I am writing to you from 667 Dark Avenue, and this is the only paper available in the neighborhood. My investigation of the Baudelaire orphans' stay in this wealthy and woeful place is finally complete—I only pray that the manuscript will reach you.

Not next Tuesday, but the Tuesday after that, purchase a first-class, one-way ticket on the second-to-last train out of the city. Instead of boarding the train, wait until it departs and climb down to the tracks to retrieve the complete summary of my investigation, entitled THE ERSATZ ELEVATOR, as well as one of Jerome's neckties, a small photograph of Veblen Hall, a bottle of parsley soda, and the doorman's coat, so that Mr. Helquist can properly illustrate this terrible chapter in the Baudelaires' lives.

Remember, you are my last hope that the tales of the Baudelaire orphans can finally be told to the general public.

With all due respect,

Lemony Snicket

Lemony Snicket

A Series of Unfortunate Events

THE BAD BEGINNING

THE REPTILE ROOM

THE WIDE WINDOW

THE MISERABLE MILL

THE AUSTERE ACADEMY

THE ERSATZ ELEVATOR

THE VILE VILLAGE

THE HOSTILE HOSPITAL

THE CARNIVOROUS CARNIVAL

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Credits

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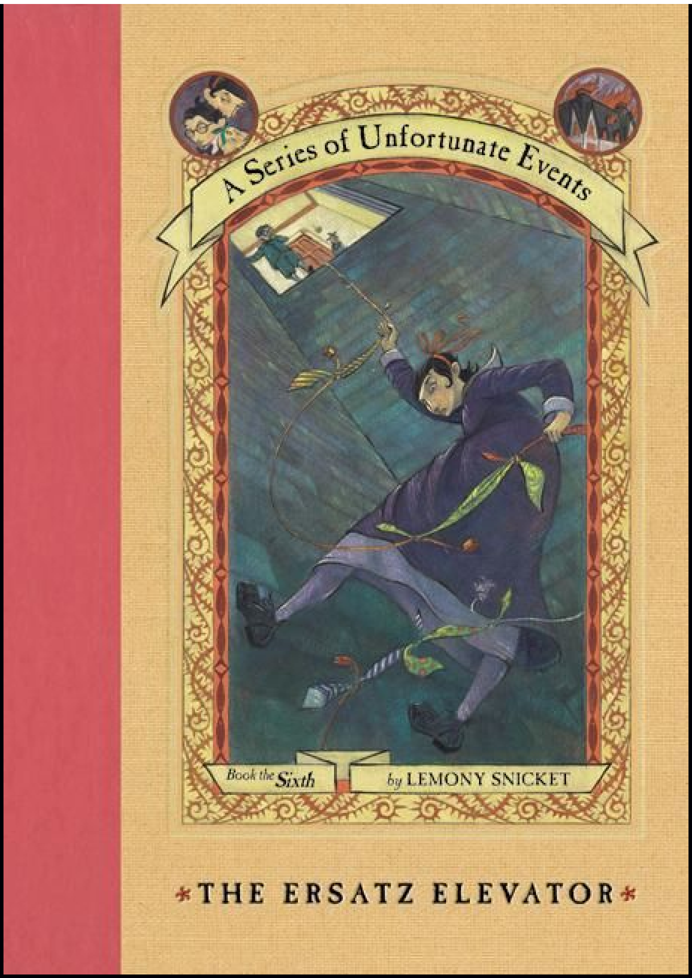
A Series of Unfortunate Events #6:
The Ersatz Elevator


A Series of Unfortunate Events
Book the Sixth
by LEMONY SNICKET
THE ERSATZ ELEVATOR

A Series of Unfortunate Events

BOOK the Sixth

THE ERSATZ ELEVATOR

***by* LEMONY SNICKET**

***Illustrations by* Brett Helquist**

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Dear Reader**,**

If you have just picked up this book, then it is not too late to put it back down. Like the previous books in A SERIES OF UNFORTUNATE EVENTS, there is nothing to be found in these pages but misery, despair, and discomfort, and you still have time to choose something else to read.

Within the chapters of this story, Violet, Klaus, and Sunny Baudelaire encounter a darkened staircase, a red herring, some friends in a dire situation, three mysterious initials, a liar with an evil scheme, a secret passageway, and parsley soda.

I have sworn to write down these tales of the Baudelaire orphans so the general public will know each terrible thing that has happened to them, but if you decide to read something else instead, you will save yourself from a heapful of horror and woe.

With all due respect,

Lemony Snicket

Lemony Snicket

For Beatrice—
When we met, my life began.
Soon afterward, yours ended.

CHAPTER
One

The book you are holding in your two hands right now—assuming that you are, in fact, holding this book, and that you have only two hands—is one of two books in the world that will show you the difference between the word “nervous” and the word “anxious.” The other book, of course, is the dictionary, and if I were you I would read that book instead.

Like this book, the dictionary shows you that the word “nervous” means “worried about something”—you might feel nervous, for instance, if you were served prune ice cream for dessert, because you would be worried that it would taste awful—whereas the word “anxious” means “troubled by disturbing suspense,” which you might feel if you were served a live alligator for dessert, because you would be troubled by the disturbing suspense about whether you would eat your dessert or it would eat you. But unlike this book, the dictionary also discusses words that are far more pleasant to contemplate. The word “bubble” is in the dictionary, for instance, as is the word “peacock,” the word “vacation,” and the words “the” “author’s” “execution” “has” “been” “canceled,” which make up a sentence that is always pleasant to hear. So if you were to read the dictionary, rather than this book, you could skip the parts about “nervous” and “anxious” and read about things that wouldn’t keep you up all night long, weeping and tearing out your hair.

But this book is not the dictionary, and if you were to skip the parts about “nervous” and “anxious” in this book, you would be skipping the most pleasant sections in the entire story. Nowhere in this book will you find the words “bubble,” “peacock,” “vacation,” or, unfortunately for me, anything about an execution being canceled. Instead, I’m sorry to say, you will find the words “grief, “despair,” and “woeful” as well as the phrases “dark passageway,” “Count Olaf in disguise,” and “the Baudelaire orphans were trapped,” plus an assortment of miserable words and phrases that I cannot bring myself to write down. In short, reading a dictionary might make you feel nervous, because you would worry about finding it very boring, but reading this book will make you feel anxious, because you will be troubled by the disturbing suspense in which the Baudelaire orphans find themselves, and if I were you I would drop this book right out of your two or more hands and curl up with a dictionary instead, because all the miserable words I must use to describe these unfortunate events are about to reach your eyes.

“I imagine you must be nervous,” Mr. Poe said. Mr. Poe was a banker who had been put in charge of the Baudelaire orphans following the death of their parents in a horrible fire. I am sorry to say that Mr. Poe had not done a very good job so far, and that the Baudelaires had learned that the only thing they could rely on with Mr. Poe was that he always had a cough. Sure enough, as soon as he finished his sentence, he took out his white handkerchief and coughed into it.

The flash of white cotton was practically the only thing the Baudelaire orphans could see. Violet, Klaus, and Sunny were standing with Mr. Poe in front of an enormous apartment building on Dark Avenue, a street in one of the fanciest districts in the city. Although Dark Avenue was just a few blocks away from where the Baudelaire mansion had been, the three children had never been in this neighborhood before, and they had assumed that the “dark” in Dark Avenue was simply a name and nothing more, the way a street named George Washington Boulevard does not necessarily indicate that George Washington lives there or the way Sixth Street has not been divided into six equal parts. But this afternoon the Baudelaires realized that Dark Avenue was more than a name. It was an appropriate description. Rather than street-lamps, placed at regular intervals along the sidewalk were enormous trees the likes of which the children had never seen before—and which they could scarcely see now. High above a thick and prickly trunk, the branches of the trees drooped down like laundry hung out to dry, spreading their wide, flat leaves out in every direction, like a low, leafy ceiling over the Baudelaires’ heads. This ceiling blocked out all the light from above, so even though it was the middle of the afternoon, the street looked as dark as evening—if a bit greener. It was hardly a good way to make three orphans feel welcome as they approached their new home.

“You have nothing to be nervous about,” Mr. Poe said, putting his handkerchief back in his pocket. “I realize some of your previous guardians have caused a little trouble, but I think Mr. and Mrs. Squalor will provide you with a proper home.”

“We’re not nervous,” Violet said. “We’re too anxious to be nervous.”

“‘Anxious’ and ‘nervous’ mean the same thing,” Mr. Poe said. “And what do you have to be anxious about, anyway?”

“Count Olaf, of course,” Violet replied. Violet was fourteen, which made her the eldest Baudelaire child and the one who was most likely to speak up to adults. She was a superb inventor, and I am certain that if she had not been so anxious, she would have tied her hair up in a ribbon to keep it out of her eyes while she thought of an invention that could brighten up her surroundings.

“Count Olaf?” Mr. Poe said dismissively. “Don’t worry about him. He’ll never find you here.”

The three children looked at one another and sighed. Count Olaf had been the first guardian Mr. Poe had found for the orphans, and he was a person as shady as Dark Avenue. He had one long eyebrow, a tattoo of an eye on his ankle, and two filthy hands that he hoped to use to snatch away the Baudelaire fortune that the orphans would inherit as soon as Violet came of age. The children had convinced Mr. Poe to remove them from Olaf’s care, but since then the count had pursued them with a dogged determination, a phrase which here means “everywhere they went, thinking up treacherous schemes and wearing disguises to try to fool the three children.”

“It’s hard not to worry about Olaf,” Klaus said, taking off his glasses to see if it was easier to look around the gloom without them, “because he has our compatriots in his clutches.” Although Klaus, the middle Baudelaire, was only twelve, he had read so many books that he frequently used words like “compatriots,” which is a fancy word for “friends.” Klaus was referring to the Quagmire triplets, whom the Baudelaires had met while they were attending boarding school. Duncan Quagmire was a reporter, and was always writing down useful information in his notebook. Isadora Quagmire was a poet, and used her notebook to write poetry. The third triplet, Quigley, had died in a fire before the Baudelaire orphans had the opportunity to meet him, but the Baudelaires were certain that he would have been as good a friend as his siblings. Like the Baudelaires, the Quagmires were orphans, having lost their parents in the same fire that claimed their brother’s life, and also like the Baudelaires, the Quagmires had been left an enormous fortune, in the form of the famous Quagmire sapphires, which were very rare and valuable jewels. But unlike the Baudelaires, they had not been able to escape Count Olaf’s clutches. Just when the Quagmires had learned some terrible secret about Olaf, he had snatched them away, and since then the Baudelaires had been so worried that they had scarcely slept a wink. Whenever they closed their eyes, they saw only the long, black car that had whisked the Quagmires away, and they heard only the sound of their friends shrieking one fragment of the dreadful secret they had learned. “V.F.D.!” Duncan had screamed, just before the car raced away, and the Baudelaires tossed and turned, and worried for their friends, and wondered what in the world V.F.D. could stand for.

“You don’t have to worry about the Quagmires, either,” Mr. Poe said confidently. “At least, not for much longer. I don’t know if you happened to read the Mulctuary Money Management newsletter, but I have some very good news about your friends.”

“Gavu?” Sunny asked. Sunny was the youngest Baudelaire orphan, and the smallest, too. She was scarcely larger than a salami. This size was usual for her age, but she had four teeth that were larger and sharper than those of any other baby I have ever seen. Despite the maturity of her mouth, however, Sunny usually talked in a way most people found difficult to understand. By “Gavu,” for instance, she meant something along the lines of “The Quagmires have been found and rescued?” and Violet was quick to translate so Mr. Poe would understand.

“Better than that,” Mr. Poe said. “I have been promoted. I am now the bank’s Vice President in Charge of Orphan Affairs. That means that I am in charge not only of your situation, but of the Quagmire situation as well. I promise you that I will concentrate a great deal of my energy on finding the Quagmires and returning them to safety, or my name isn’t”—here Mr. Poe interrupted himself to cough once more into his handkerchief, and the Baudelaires waited patiently until he finished—“Poe. Now, as soon as I drop you off here I am taking a three-week helicopter ride to a mountain peak where the Quagmires may have been spotted. It will be very difficult to reach me during that time, as the helicopter has no phone, but I will call you as soon as I get back with your young pals. Now, can you see the number on this building? It’s hard for me to tell if we’re at the right place.”

“I think it says 667,” Klaus said, squinting in the dim green light.

“Then we’re here,” Mr. Poe said. “Mr. and Mrs. Squalor live in the penthouse apartment of 667 Dark Avenue. I think the door is *here*.”

“No, it’s over here,” said a high, scratchy voice out of the darkness. The Baudelaires jumped a little in surprise, and turned to see a man wearing a hat with a wide brim and a coat that was much too big for him. The coat sleeves hung over his hands, covering them completely, and the brim of his hat covered most of his face. He was so difficult to see that it was no wonder that the children hadn’t spotted him earlier. “Most of our visitors find it hard to spot the door,” the man said. “That’s why they hired a doorman.”

“Well, I’m glad they did,” Mr. Poe said. “My name is Poe, and I have an appointment with Mr. and Mrs. Squalor to drop off their new children.”

“Oh, yes,” the doorman said. “They told me you were coming. Come on in.”

The doorman opened the door of the building and showed them inside to a room that was as dark as the street. Instead of lights, there were only a few candles placed on the floor, and the children could scarcely tell whether it was a large room or a small room they were standing in.

“My, it’s dark in here,” Mr. Poe said. “Why don’t you ask your employers to bring in a good strong halogen lamp?”

“We can’t,” the doorman replied. “Right now, dark is in.”

“In what?” Violet asked.

“Just ‘in,’” the doorman explained. “Around here, people decide whether something is in, which means it’s stylish and appealing, or out, which means it’s not. And it changes all the time. Why, just a couple of weeks ago, dark was out, and light was in, and you should have seen this neighborhood. You had to wear sunglasses all the time or you’d hurt your eyes.”

“Dark is in, huh?” Mr. Poe said. “Wait until I tell my wife. In the meantime, could you show us where the elevator is? Mr. and Mrs. Squalor live in the penthouse apartment, and I don’t want to walk all the way to the top floor.”

“Well, I’m afraid you’ll have to,” the doorman said. “There’s a pair of elevator doors right over there, but they won’t be of any use to you.”

“Is the elevator out of order?” Violet asked. “I’m very good with mechanical devices, and I’d be happy to take a look at it.”

“That’s a very kind and unusual offer,” the doorman said. “But the elevator isn’t out of order. It’s just out. The neighborhood decided that elevators were out, so they had the elevator shut down. Stairs are in, though, so there’s still a way to get to the penthouse. Let me show you.”

The doorman led the way across the lobby, and the Baudelaire orphans peered up at a very long, curved staircase made of wood, with a metal banister that curved alongside. Every few steps, they could see, somebody had placed more candles, so the staircase looked like nothing more than curves of flickering lights, growing dimmer as the staircase went farther and farther up, until they could see nothing at all.

“I’ve never seen anything like this,” Klaus said.

“It looks more like a cave than a staircase,” Violet said.

“Pinse!” Sunny said, which meant something like “Or outer space!”

“It looks like a long walk to me,” Mr. Poe said, frowning. He turned to the doorman. “How many floors up does this staircase go?”

The doorman’s shoulders shrugged underneath his oversized coat. “I can’t remember,” he said. “I think it’s forty-eight, but it might be eighty-four.”

“I didn’t know buildings could be that high,” Klaus said.

“Well, whether it’s forty-eight or eighty-four,” Mr. Poe said, “I don’t have time to walk you children all the way up. I’ll miss my helicopter. You’ll have to go up by yourselves, and tell Mr. and Mrs. Squalor that I send my regards.”

“We have to walk up by ourselves?” Violet said.

“Just be glad you don’t have any of your things with you,” Mr. Poe said. “Mrs. Squalor said there was no reason to bring any of your old clothing, and I think it’s because she wanted to save you the effort of dragging suitcases up all those stairs.”

“You’re not going to come with us?” Klaus asked.

“I simply don’t have the time to accompany you,” Mr. Poe said, “and that is that.”

The Baudelaires looked at one another. The children knew, as I’m sure you know, that there is usually no reason to be afraid of the dark, but even if you are not particularly afraid of something, you might not want to get near it, and the orphans were a bit nervous about climbing all the way up to the penthouse without an adult walking beside them.

“If you’re afraid of the dark,” Mr. Poe said, “I suppose I could delay my search for the Quagmires, and take you to your new guardians.”

“No, no,” Klaus said quickly. “We’re not afraid of the dark, and finding the Quagmires is much more important.”

“Obog,” Sunny said doubtfully.

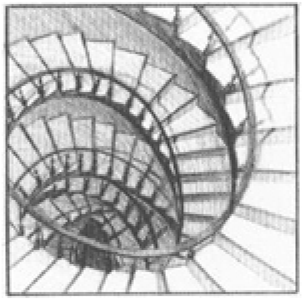
“Just try to crawl as long as you can,” Violet said to her sister, “and then Klaus and I will take turns carrying you. Good-bye, Mr. Poe.”

“Good-bye, children,” Mr. Poe said. “If there’s any problem, remember you can always contact me or any of my associates at Mulctuary Money Management—at least, as soon as I get off the helicopter.”

“There’s one good thing about this staircase,” the doorman joked, starting to walk Mr. Poe back to the front door. “It’s all uphill from here.”

The Baudelaire orphans listened to the doorman’s chuckles as he disappeared into the darkness, and they walked up the first few steps. As I’m sure you know, the expression “It’s all uphill from here” has nothing to do with walking up stairs—it merely means that things will get better in the future. The children had understood the joke, but they were too anxious to laugh. They were anxious about Count Olaf, who might find them any minute. They were anxious about the Quagmire triplets, whom they might never see again. And now, as they began to walk up the candlelit stairway, they were anxious about their new guardians. They tried to imagine what sort of people would live on such a dark street, in such a dark building, and at the top of either forty-eight or eighty-four flights of very dark stairs. They found it difficult to believe that things would get better in the future when they lived in such gloomy and poorly lit surroundings. Even though a long, upward climb awaited them, as the Baudelaire orphans started walking into the darkness, they were too anxious to believe it was all uphill from here.

CHAPTER
Two



In order to get a better sense of exactly how the Baudelaire orphans felt as they began the grueling journey up the stairs to Mr. and Mrs. Squalor's penthouse apartment, you might find it useful to close your eyes as you read this chapter, because the light was so dim from the small candles on the ground that it felt as if their eyes were closed even when they were looking as hard as they could. At each curve in the staircase, there was a door that led to the apartment on each floor, and a pair of sliding elevator doors. From behind the sliding doors, the youngsters of course heard nothing, as the elevator had been shut down, but behind the doors to the apartments the children could hear the noises of people who lived in the building. When they reached the seventh floor, they heard two men laugh as somebody told a joke. When they reached the twelfth floor, they heard the splashing of water as somebody took a bath. When they reached the nineteenth floor, they heard a woman say "Let them eat cake" in a voice with a strange accent.

"I wonder what people will hear when they walk by the penthouse apartment," Violet wondered out loud, "when we are living there."

“I hope they hear me turning pages,” Klaus said. “Maybe Mr. and Mrs. Squalor will have some interesting books to read.”

“Or maybe people will hear me using a wrench,” Violet said. “I hope the Squalors have some tools they’d let me use for my inventing.”

“Crife!” Sunny said, crawling carefully past one of the candles on the ground.

Violet looked down at her and smiled. “I don’t think that will be a problem, Sunny,” she said. “You usually find something or other to bite. Be sure to speak up when you want us to start carrying you.”

“I wish somebody could carry *me,*” Klaus said, clutching the banister for support. “I’m getting tired.”

“Me too,” Violet admitted. “You would think, after Count Olaf made us run all those laps when he was disguised as a gym teacher, that these stairs wouldn’t tire us out, but that’s not the case. What floor are we on, anyway?”

“I don’t know,” Klaus said. “The doors aren’t numbered, and I’ve lost count.”

“Well, we won’t miss the penthouse,” Violet said. “It’s on the top floor, so we’ll just keep walking until the stairs stop.”

“I wish you could invent a device that could take us up the stairs,” Klaus said.

Violet smiled, although her siblings couldn’t see it in the darkness. “That device was invented a long time ago,” she said. “It’s called an elevator. But elevators are out, remember?”

Klaus smiled too. “And tired feet are in,” he said.

“Remember that time,” Violet said, “when our parents attended the Sixteenth Annual Run-a-Thon, and their feet were so tired when they got home that Dad prepared dinner while sitting on the kitchen floor, instead of standing?”

“Of course I remember,” Klaus said. “We had only salad, because they couldn’t stand up and reach the stove.”

“It would have been a perfect meal for Aunt Josephine,” Violet said, remembering one of the Baudelaires’ previous guardians. “She never wanted to use the stove, because she thought it might explode.”

“Pomres,” Sunny said sadly. She meant something along the lines of “As it turned out, the stove was the least of Aunt Josephine’s problems.”

“That’s true,” Violet said quietly, as the children heard someone sneeze from behind a door.

“I wonder what the Squalors will be like,” Klaus said.

“Well, they must be wealthy to live on Dark Avenue,” Violet said.

“Akrofil,” Sunny said, which meant “And they’re not afraid of heights, that’s for sure.”

Klaus smiled and looked down at his sister. “You sound tired, Sunny,” he said. “Violet and I can take turns carrying you. We’ll switch every three floors.”

Violet nodded in agreement with Klaus’s plan, and then said “Yes” out loud because she realized that her nod was invisible in the gloom. They continued up the staircase, and I’m sorry to say that the two older Baudelaires took many, many turns holding Sunny. If the Baudelaires had been going up a staircase of regular size, I would write the sentence “Up and up they went,” but a more appropriate sentence would begin “Up and up and up and up” and would take either forty-eight or eighty-four pages to reach “they went,” because the staircase was so unbelievably lengthy. Occasionally, they would pass the shadowy figure of someone else walking down the stairs, but the children were too tired to say even “Good afternoon”—and, later, “Good evening”—to these other residents of 667 Dark Avenue. The Baudelaires grew hungry. They grew achy. And they grew very tired of gazing at identical candles and steps and doors.

Just when they could stand it no longer, they reached another candle and step and door, and about five flights after that the stairs finally ended and deposited the tired children in a small room with one last candle sitting in the middle of the carpet. By the light of the candle, the Baudelaire orphans could see the door to their new home, and across the way, two pairs of sliding elevator doors with arrowed buttons alongside.

“Just think,” Violet said, panting from her long walk up the stairs, “if elevators were in, we would have arrived at the Squalor penthouse in just a few minutes.”

“Well, maybe they’ll be back in soon,” Klaus said. “I hope so. The other door must be to the Squalors’ apartment. Let’s knock.”

They knocked on the door, and almost instantly it swung open to reveal a tall man wearing a suit with long, narrow stripes down it. Such a suit is called a pinstripe suit, and is usually worn by people who are either movie stars or gangsters.

“I thought I heard someone approaching the door,” the man said, giving the children a smile that was so big they could see it even in the dim room. “Please come in. My name is Jerome Squalor, and I’m so happy that you’ve come to stay with us.”

“I’m very pleased to meet you, Mr. Squalor,” Violet said, still panting, as she and her siblings walked into an entryway almost as dim as the staircase. “I’m Violet Baudelaire, and this is my brother, Klaus, and my sister, Sunny.”

“Goodness, you sound out of breath,” Mr. Squalor said. “Luckily, I can think of two things to do about that. One is that you can stop calling me Mr. Squalor and start calling me Jerome. I’ll call you three by your first names, too, and that way we’ll all save breath. The second thing is that I’ll make you a nice, cold martini. Come right this way.”

“A martini?” Klaus asked. “Isn’t that an alcoholic beverage?”

“Usually it is,” Jerome agreed. “But right now, alcoholic martinis are out. Aqueous martinis are in. An aqueous martini is simply cold water served in a fancy glass with an olive in it, so it’s perfectly legal for children as well as for adults.”

“I’ve never had an aqueous martini,” Violet said, “but I’ll try one.”

“Ah!” Jerome said. “You’re adventurous! I like that in a person. Your mother was adventurous, too. You know, she and I were very good friends a ways back. We hiked up Mount Fraught with some friends—gosh, it must have been twenty years ago. Mount Fraught was known for having dangerous animals on it, but your mother wasn’t afraid. But then, swooping out of the sky—”

“Jerome, who was that at the door?” called a voice from the next room, and in walked a tall, slender woman, also dressed in a pinstripe suit. She had long fingernails that were so strongly polished that they shone even in the dim light.

“The Baudelaire children, of course,” Jerome replied.

“But they’re not coming today!” the woman cried.

“Of course they are,” Jerome said. “I’ve been looking forward to it for days and days! You know,” he said, turning from the woman to the Baudelaires, “I wanted to adopt you from the moment I heard about the fire. But, unfortunately, it was impossible.”

“Orphans were out then,” the woman explained. “Now they’re in.”

“My wife is always very attentive to what’s in and what’s out,” Jerome said. “I don’t care about it much, but Esmé feels differently. She was the one who insisted on having the elevator removed. Esmé, I was just about to make them some aqueous martinis. Would you like one?”

“Oh, yes!” Esmé cried. “Aqueous martinis are in!” She walked quickly over to the children and looked them over. “I’m Esmé Gigi Geniveve Squalor, the city’s sixth most important financial advisor,” she announced grandly. “Even though I am unbelievably wealthy, you may call me Esmé. I’ll learn your names later. I’m very happy you’re here, because orphans are in, and when all my friends hear that I have three real live orphans, they’ll be sick with jealousy, won’t they, Jerome?”

“I hope not,” Jerome said, leading the children down a long, dim hallway to a huge, dim room that had various fancy couches, chairs, and tables. At the far end of the room was a series of windows, all with their shades drawn so that no light could get in. “I don’t like to hear of anybody getting sick. Well, have a seat, children, and we’ll tell you a little bit about your new home.”

The Baudelaires sat down in three huge chairs, grateful for the opportunity to rest their feet. Jerome crossed to one of the tables, where a pitcher of water sat next to a bowl of olives and some fancy glasses, and quickly prepared the aqueous martinis. “Here you go,” he said, handing Esmé and the children each a fancy glass. “Let’s see. In case you ever get lost, remember that your new address is 667 Dark Avenue in the penthouse apartment.”

“Oh, don’t tell them silly things like that,” Esmé said, waving her long-nailed hand in front of her face as if a moth were attacking it. “Children, here are some things you should know. Dark is in. Light is out. Stairs are in. Elevators are out. Pinstripe suits are in. Those horrible clothes you are wearing are out.”

“What Esmé means,” Jerome said quickly, “is that we want you to feel as comfortable here as possible.”

Violet took a sip of her aqueous martini. She was not surprised to find that it tasted like plain water, with a slight hint of olive. She didn’t like it much, but it did quench her thirst from the long climb up the stairs. “That’s very nice of you,” she said.

“Mr. Poe told me about some of your previous guardians,” Jerome said, shaking his head. “I feel awful that you’ve had such terrible experiences, and that we could have cared for you the entire time.”

“It couldn’t be helped,” Esmé said. “When something is out, it’s out, and orphans used to be out.”

“I heard all about this Count Olaf person, too,” Jerome said. “I told the doorman not to let anyone in the building who looked even vaguely like that despicable man, so you should be safe.”

“That’s a relief,” Klaus said.

“That dreadful man is supposed to be up on some mountain, anyway,” Esmé said. “Remember, Jerome? That unstylish banker said he was going away in a helicopter to go find those twins he kidnapped.”

“Actually,” Violet said, “they’re triplets. The Quagmires are good friends of ours.”

“My word!” Jerome said. “You must be worried sick!”

“Well, if they find them soon,” Esmé said, “maybe we’ll adopt them, too. Five orphans! I’ll be the innest person in town!”

“We certainly have room for them,” Jerome said. “This is a seventy-one-bedroom apartment, children, so you will have your pick of rooms. Klaus, Poe mentioned something about your being interested in inventing things, is that right?”

“My sister’s the inventor,” Klaus replied. “I’m more of a researcher myself.”

“Well, then,” Jerome said. “You can have the bedroom next to the library, and Violet can have the one that has a large wooden bench, perfect for keeping tools. Sunny can be in the room between you two. How does that sound?”

That sounded absolutely splendid, of course, but the Baudelaire orphans did not get an opportunity to say so, because a telephone rang just at that instant.

“I’ll get it! I’ll get it!” Esmé cried, and raced across the room to pick up the phone. “Squalor residence,” she said, into the receiver, and then waited as the person spoke on the other end. “Yes, this is Mrs. Squalor. Yes. Yes. Yes? Oh, thank you, thank you, thank you!” She hung up the phone and turned to the children. “Guess what?” she asked. “I have some fantastic news on what we were talking about!”

“The Quagmires have been found?” Klaus asked hopefully.

“Who?” Esmé asked. “Oh, them. No, they haven’t been found. Don’t be silly. Jerome, children, listen to me—dark is out! Regular light is in!”

“Well, I’m not sure I’d call that fantastic news,” Jerome said, “but it will be a relief to get some light around this place. Come on, Baudelaires, help me open the shades and you can get a look at our view. You can see quite a bit from so high up.”

“I’ll go turn on all the lamps in the penthouse,” Esmé said breathlessly. “Quickly, before anybody sees that this apartment is still dark!”

Esmé dashed from the room, while Jerome gave the three siblings a little shrug and walked across the room to the windows. The Baudelaires followed him, and helped him open the heavy shades that were covering the windows. Instantly, sunlight streamed into the room, making them squint as their eyes adjusted to regular light. If the Baudelaires had looked around the room now that it was properly illuminated, they would have seen just how fancy all the furniture was. The couches had pillows embroidered with silver. The chairs were all painted with gold paint. And the tables were made from wood chopped away from some of the most expensive trees in the world. But the Baudelaire orphans were not looking around the room, as luxurious as it was. They were looking out of the window onto the city below.

“Spectacular view, don’t you think?” Jerome asked them, and they nodded in agreement. It was as if they were looking out on a tiny, tiny city, with matchboxes instead of buildings and bookmarks instead of streets. They could see tiny colored shapes that looked like various insects but were really all the cars and carriages in town, driving along the bookmarks until they reached the matchboxes where the tiny dots of people lived and worked. The Baudelaires could see the neighborhood where they had lived with their parents, and the parts of town where their friends had lived, and in a faint blue strip far, far away, the beach where they had received the terrible news that had begun all their misfortune.

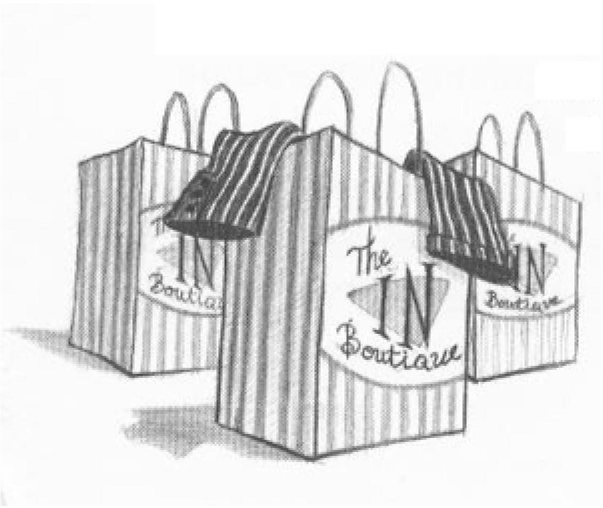
“I knew you’d like it,” Jerome said. “It’s very expensive to live in a penthouse apartment, but I think it’s worth it for a view like this. Look, those tiny round boxes over there are orange juice factories. That sort of purplish building next to the park is my favorite restaurant. Oh, and look straight down—they’re already cutting down those awful trees that made our street so dark.”

“Of course they’re cutting them down,” Esmé said, hurrying back into the room and blowing out a few candles that were sitting on the mantelpiece. “Regular light is in—as in as aqueous martinis, pinstripes, and orphans.”

Violet, Klaus, and Sunny looked straight down, and saw that Jerome was right. Those strange trees that had blocked out the sunlight on Dark Avenue, looking no taller than paper clips from such a great height, were being chopped down by little gardener dots. Even though the trees had made the street seem so gloomy, it seemed a shame to tear them all down, leaving bare stumps that, from the penthouse window, looked like thumbtacks. The three siblings looked at one another, and then back down to Dark Avenue. Those trees were no longer in, so the gardeners were getting rid of them. The Baudelaires did not like to think of what would happen when orphans were no longer in, either.

CHAPTER
Three

If you were to take a plastic bag and place it inside a large bowl, and then, using a wooden spoon, stir the bag around and around and bowl, you could use the expression “a mixed bag” to describe what you had in front of you, but you would not be using the expression in the same way I am about to use it now. Although “a mixed bag” sometimes refers to a plastic bag that has been stirred in a bowl, more often it is used to describe a situation that has both good parts and bad parts. An afternoon at a movie theater, for instance, would be a mixed bag if your favorite movie were showing, but if you had to eat gravel instead of popcorn. A trip to the zoo would be a very mixed bag if the weather were beautiful, but all of the man-and woman-eating lions were running around loose. And, for the Baudelaire orphans, their first few days with the Squalors were one of the most mixed bags they had yet encountered, because the good parts were very good, but the bad parts were simply awful.



One of the good parts was that the Baudelaires were living once more in the city where they were born and raised. After the Baudelaire parents had died, and after their disastrous stay with Count Olaf, the three children had been sent to a number of remote locations to live, and they sorely missed the familiar surroundings of their hometown. Each morning, after Esmé left for work, Jerome would take the children to some of their favorite places in town. Violet was happy to see that her favorite exhibits at the Verne Invention Museum had not been changed, so she could take another look at the mechanical demonstrations that had inspired her to be an inventor when she was just two years old. Klaus was delighted to revisit the Akhmatova Bookstore, where his father used to take him as a special treat, to buy an atlas or a volume of the encyclopedia. And Sunny was interested in visiting the Pincus Hospital where she was born, although her memories of this place were a little fuzzy.

But in the afternoons, the three children would return to 667 Dark Avenue, and it was this part of the Baudelaires' situation that was not nearly as pleasant. For one thing, the penthouse was simply too big. Besides the seventy-one bedrooms, there were a number of living rooms, dining rooms, breakfast rooms, snack rooms, sitting rooms, standing rooms, ballrooms, bathrooms, kitchens, and an assortment of rooms that seemed to have no purpose at all. The penthouse was so enormous that the Baudelaire orphans often found themselves hopelessly lost inside it. Violet would leave her bedroom to go brush her teeth and not find her way back for an hour. Klaus would accidentally leave his glasses on a kitchen counter and waste the whole afternoon trying to find the right kitchen. And Sunny would find a very comfortable spot for sitting and biting things and be unable to find it the next day. It was often difficult to spend any time with Jerome, simply because it was very difficult to find him amid all the fancy rooms of their new home, and the Baudelaires scarcely saw Esmé at all. They knew she went off to work every day and returned in the evenings, but even at the times when she was in the apartment with them, the three children scarcely caught a glimpse of the city's sixth most important financial advisor. It was as if she had forgotten all about the new members of her family, or was simply more interested in lounging around the rooms in the apartment rather than spending time with the three siblings. But the Baudelaire orphans did not really mind that Esmé was absent so often. They much preferred spending time with one another, or with Jerome, rather than participating in endless conversations about what was in and what was out.

Even when the Baudelaires stayed in their bedrooms, the three children did not have such a splendid time. As he had promised, Jerome had given Violet the bedroom with the large wooden bench, which was indeed perfect for keeping tools, but Violet could find no tools in the entire penthouse. She found it odd that such an enormous apartment would have not even a socket wrench or one measly pair of pliers, but Esmé haughtily explained, when Violet asked her one evening, that tools were out. Klaus did have the Squalor library next to his bedroom, and it was a large and comfortable room with hundreds of books on its shelves. But the middle Baudelaire was disappointed to find that every single book was merely a description of what had been in and out during various times in history. Klaus tried to interest himself in books of this type, but it was so dull to read a snooty book like *Boots Were In in 1812 or Trout: In France They're Out* that Klaus found himself spending scarcely any time in the library at all. And poor Sunny fared no better, a phrase which here means "also became bored in her bedroom." Jerome had thoughtfully placed a number of toys in her room, but they were the sort of toys designed for softer-toothed babies—squishy stuffed animals, cushioned balls, and assorted colorful pillows, none of which were the least bit fun to bite.

But what really mixed the Baudelaire bag was not the overwhelming size of the Squalor apartment, or the disappointments of a tool bench without tools, a library without interesting books, or nonchewable items of amusement. What really troubled the three children was the thought that the Quagmire triplets were undoubtedly experiencing things that were much, much worse. With every passing day, their worry for their friends felt like a heavy load on the Baudelaires' shoulders, and the load only seemed heavier, because the Squalors refused to be of any assistance.

"I'm very, very tired of discussing your little twin friends," Esmé said one day, as the Baudelaires and the Squalors sipped aqueous martinis one evening in a living room the children had never seen before. “I know you’re worried about them, but it’s boring to keep blabbing on about it.”

“We didn’t mean to bore you,” Violet said, not adding that it is terribly rude to tell people that their troubles are boring.

“Of course you didn’t,” Jerome said, picking the olive out of his fancy glass and popping it into his mouth before turning to his wife. “The children are concerned, Esmé, which is perfectly understandable. I know Mr. Poe is doing all he can, but maybe we can put our heads together and come up with something else.”

“I don’t have time to put my head together,” Esmé said. “The In Auction is coming up, and I have to devote all of my energy to making sure it’s a success.”

“The In Auction?” Klaus asked.

“An auction,” Jerome explained, “is a sort of sale. Everyone gets together in a large room, and an auctioneer shows off a bunch of things that are available for purchase. If you see something you like, you call out how much you’d be willing to pay for it. That’s called a bid. Then somebody else might call out a bid, and somebody else, and whoever calls out the highest price wins the auction and buys the item in question. It’s terribly exciting. Your mother used to love them! I remember one time—”

“You forgot the most important part,” Esmé interrupted. “It’s called the In Auction because we’re selling only things that are in. I always organize it, and it’s one of the most smashing events of the year!”

“Smashi?” Sunny asked.

“In this case,” Klaus explained to his younger sister, “the word ‘smashing’ doesn’t mean that things got smashed up. It just means ‘fabulous.’”

“And it *is* fabulous,” Esmé said, finishing her aqueous martini. “We hold the auction at Veblen Hall, and we auction off only the innest things we can find, and best of all, all the money goes to a good cause."

"Which good cause?" Violet asked.

Esmé clapped her long-nailed hands together with glee. "Me! Every last bit of money that people pay at the auction goes right to me! Isn't that smashing?"

"Actually, dear," Jerome said, "I was thinking that this year, perhaps we should give the money to another good cause. For instance, I was just reading about this family of seven. The mother and father lost their jobs, and now they're so poor that they can't even afford to live in a one-room apartment. We might send some of the auction money to people like them."

"Don't talk nonsense," Esmé said crossly. "If we give money to poor people, then they won't be poor anymore. Besides, this year we're going to make heaps of money. I had lunch with twelve millionaires this morning, and eleven of them said they were definitely going to attend the In Auction. The twelfth one has to go to a birthday party. Just think of the money I'll make, Jerome! Maybe we could move to a bigger apartment!"

"But we just moved in a few weeks ago," Jerome said. "I'd rather spend some money on putting the elevator back in use. It's very tiring to climb all the way up to the penthouse."

"There you go, talking nonsense again," Esmé said. "If I'm not listening to my orphans babble about their kidnapped friends, I'm listening to you talk about out things like elevators. Well, we have no more time for chitchat in any case. Gunther is stopping by tonight, and I want you, Jerome, to take the children out for dinner."

"Who is Gunther?" Jerome asked.

"Gunther is the auctioneer, of course," Esmé replied. "He's supposed to be the innest auctioneer in town, and he's going to help me organize the auction. He's coming over tonight to discuss the auction catalog, and we don't want to be disturbed. That's why I want you to go out to dinner, and give us a little privacy."

"But I was going to teach the children how to play chess tonight," Jerome said.

"No, no, no," Esmé said. "You're going out to dinner. It's all arranged. I made a reservation at Café Salmonella for seven o'clock. It's six o'clock now, so you should get moving. You want to allow plenty of time to walk down all those stairs. But before you leave, children, I have a present for each of you."

At this, the Baudelaire children were taken aback, a phrase which here means "surprised that someone who was so selfish had purchased gifts for them," but sure enough, Esmé reached behind the dark red sofa she was sitting on, and brought out three shopping bags that had the words "In Boutique" written on them in fancy, curly script. With an elegant gesture, Esmé handed a bag to each Baudelaire.

"I thought if I bought you something you really wanted," she said, "you might stop all this chatter about the Quagmires."

"What Esmé means," Jerome added hurriedly, "is that we want you to be happy here in our home, even when you're worried about your friends."

"That's not what I mean at all," Esmé said, "but never mind. Open the bags, kids."

The Baudelaires opened their presents, and I'm sorry to say that the shopping bags were mixed bags as well. There are many, many things that are difficult in this life, but one thing that isn't difficult at all is figuring out whether someone is excited or not when they open a present. If someone is excited, they will often put exclamation points at the ends of their sentences to indicate their excited tone of voice. If they say "Oh!" for instance, the exclamation point would indicate that the person is saying "Oh!" in an excited way, rather than simply saying "Oh," with a comma after it, which would indicate that the present is somewhat disappointing.

"Oh," Violet said, as she opened her present.

"Oh," Klaus said, as he opened his.

“Oh,” Sunny said, as she tore open her shopping bag with her teeth.

“Pinstripe suits! I knew you’d be excited!” Esmé said. “You must have been mortified the last few days, walking around the city without wearing any pinstripes! Pinstripes are in, and orphans are in, so just imagine how in you’ll be when you orphans are wearing pinstripes! No wonder you’re so excited!”

“They didn’t sound excited when they opened the presents,” Jerome said, “and I don’t blame them. Esmé, I thought we said that we’d buy Violet a tool kit. She’s very enthusiastic about inventing, and I thought we’d support that enthusiasm.”

“But I’m enthusiastic about pinstripe suits, too,” Violet said, knowing that you should always say that you are delighted with a present even when you don’t like it at all. “Thank you very much.”

“And Klaus was supposed to get a good almanac,” Jerome continued. “I told you about his interest in the International Date Line, and an almanac is the perfect book to learn all about that.”

“But I’m *very* interested in pinstripes,” said Klaus, who could lie as well as his sister, when the need arose. “I really appreciate this gift.”

“And Sunny,” Jerome said, “was going to be given a large square made of bronze. It would have been attractive, and easily bitable.”

“Ayjim,” Sunny said. She meant something along the lines of “I love my suit. Thank you very much,” even though she didn’t mean it one bit.

“I know we discussed buying those silly items,” Esmé said, with a wave of her long-nailed hand, “but tools have been out for weeks, almanacs have been out for months, and I received a phone call this afternoon informing me that large bronze squares are not expected to be in for at least another year. What’s in now is pinstripes, Jerome, and I don’t appreciate your trying to teach my new children that they should ignore what’s in and what’s out. Don’t you want what’s best for the orphans?”

“Of course,” Jerome sighed. “I hadn’t thought of it that way, Esmé. Well, children, I do hope you like your gifts, even though they don’t exactly match up with your interests. Why don’t you go change into your new suits, and we’ll wear them to dinner?”

“Oh, yes!” Esmé said. “Café Salmonella is one of the innest restaurants. In fact, I think they don’t even let you eat there if you’re not wearing pinstripes, so go change. But hurry up! Gunther is due to arrive any minute.”

“We’ll hurry,” Klaus promised, “and thank you again for our gifts.”

“You’re very welcome,” Jerome said with a smile, and the children smiled back at him, walked out of the living room, down a long hallway, across a kitchen, through another living room, past four bathrooms, and so on and so on and so on, eventually finding their way to their bedrooms. They stood together for a minute outside the three bedroom doors, looking sadly into their shopping bags.

“I don’t know how we’re going to wear these things,” Violet said.

“I don’t either,” Klaus said. “And it’s all the worse knowing that we almost got presents we really want.”

“Puictiw,” Sunny agreed glumly.

“Listen to us,” Violet said. “We sound hopelessly spoiled. We’re living in an enormous apartment. We each have our own room. The doorman has promised to watch out for Count Olaf, and at least one of our new guardians is an interesting person. And yet we’re standing here complaining.”

“You’re right,” Klaus said. “We should make the best of things. Getting a lousy present isn’t really worth complaining over—not when our friends are in such terrible danger. We’re really very lucky to be here at all.”

“Chittol,” Sunny said, which meant something like “That’s true. We should stop complaining and go change into our new outfits.”

The Baudelaires stood together for another moment and nodded resolutely, a phrase which here means “tried to make themselves stop feeling ungrateful and put on the suits.” But even though they didn’t want to seem spoiled, even though they knew their situation was not a terrible one at all, and even though they had less than an hour to change into the suits, find Jerome, and walk down all those hundreds and hundreds of stairs, the three children could not seem to move. They simply stood in front of their bedroom doors and stared into their bags from the In Boutique.

“Of course,” Klaus said finally, “no matter how lucky we are, the fact remains that these pinstripe suits are entirely too big for us.”

Klaus spoke the truth. It was a truth that might help you understand why the Baudelaires were so disappointed with what was in their bags. It was a truth that might help you understand why the Baudelaires were so reluctant to go into their rooms and change into their pinstripe suits. And it was a truth that became even more obvious when the Baudelaires finally went into their rooms, and opened their bags and put on the gifts that Esmé had given them.

It is often difficult to tell if a piece of clothing will fit you or not until you try it on, but the Baudelaire children could tell the instant they first looked into the shopping bags that these clothes dwarfed them by comparison. The expression “dwarfed by comparison” has nothing to do with dwarves, who are dull creatures in fairy tales who spend their time whistling and cleaning house. “Dwarfed by comparison” simply means that one thing seems small when compared to another thing. A mouse would be dwarfed by comparison with an ostrich, which is much bigger, and an ostrich would be dwarfed by comparison with the city of Paris. And the Baudelaires were dwarfed by comparison with the pinstripe suits. When Violet put the pants part of her suit on, the legs of the suit stretched much, much farther than the legs of her body, so it was as if she had two huge noodles instead of feet. When Klaus put the jacket part of his suit on, the sleeves fell far, far past his hands, so his arms looked as if they had shrunk up inside his body. And Sunny’s suit dwarfed her so much by comparison that it was as if she had pulled the covers over her in bed instead of changing her clothes. When the Baudelaires stepped back out of their bedrooms and met up again in the hallway, they were so dwarfed by comparison that they scarcely recognized one another.

“You look like you’re skiing,” Klaus said, pointing at his older sister’s pant legs. “Except your skis are made of cloth instead of titanium alloy.”

“You look like you remembered to put on your jacket, but forgot to put on your arms,” Violet replied with a grin.

“Mmphmm!” Sunny shrieked, and even her two siblings couldn’t understand what she was saying from beneath all the pinstriped cloth.

“Goodness, Sunny,” Violet said, “I thought you were a lump in the carpet. Here, we’d better just tie one of the sleeves of the suit around you. Maybe tomorrow we can find a pair of scissors, and—”

“Nnphnn!” Sunny interrupted.

“Oh, don’t be silly, Sunny,” Klaus said. “We’ve seen you in your underwear hundreds of times. One more time won’t matter.” But Klaus was wrong. He wasn’t wrong about the underwear—if you are a baby, your family will see you in your underwear many times, and there’s no use being embarrassed about it—but he was wrong in thinking that by saying “Nnphnn!” Sunny had been complaining about getting undressed in front of her siblings. Sunny’s oversized suit had muffled the word she was really saying, and it was a word that still haunts me in my dreams as I toss and turn each night, images of Beatrice and her legacy filling my weary, grieving brain no matter where in the world I travel and no matter what important evidence I discover.

It is necessary once more to use the expression “dwarfed in comparison,” in order to refer to what happened after Sunny said that fatal word out loud. For even though Violet and Klaus could not hear what Sunny had said, they learned instantly what their sister had meant. For as Sunny uttered the word, a long shadow was cast over the Baudelaires, and they looked up to see what was blocking the light. And when they looked, they felt everything about their lives become dwarfed in comparison to how trapped they felt, because this word, I’m sorry to say, was “Olaf.”

CHAPTER
Four

If you are ever forced to take a chemistry class, you will probably see, at the front of the classroom, a large chart divided into squares, with different numbers and letters in each of them. This chart is called the table of the elements, and scientists like to say that it contains all the substances that make up our world. Like everyone else, scientists are wrong from time to time, and it is easy to see that they are wrong about the table of the elements. Because although this table contains a great many elements, from the element oxygen, which is found in the air, to the element aluminum, which is found in cans of soda, the table of the elements does not contain one of the most powerful elements that make up our world, and that is the element of surprise. The element of surprise is not a gas, like oxygen, or a solid, like aluminum. The element of surprise is an unfair advantage, and it can be found in situations in which one person has sneaked up on another. The surprised person—or, in this sad case, the surprised persons—are too stunned to defend themselves, and the sneaky person has the advantage of the element of surprise.

“Hello, please,” Count Olaf said in his raspy voice, and the Baudelaire orphans were too stunned to defend themselves. They did not scream. They did not run away from Olaf. They did not call out for their guardians to save them. They merely stood there, in their enormous pinstripe suits, and stared at the terrible man who had somehow found them once more.

As Olaf looked down at them with a nasty smile, enjoying the unfair advantage of the element of surprise, the children saw that he was in yet another of his nefarious disguises, a phrase which here means that he did not fool them one bit no matter what he was wearing. On Olaf’s feet were a pair of shiny black boots with high tops that almost reached his knees—the sort of boots that someone might wear to ride a horse. Over one of Olaf’s eyes was a monocle, which is an eyeglass for one eye, instead of two—the sort of eyewear that requires you to furrow your brow in order to keep it in place. And the rest of his body was covered in a pinstripe suit—the sort of suit that someone might wear in order to be in at the time when this story takes place. But the Baudelaires knew that Olaf didn’t care about being in, any more than he had imperfect vision in one eye or was about to go horseback riding. The three children knew that Olaf was wearing boots to cover up the tattoo of an eye that he had on his left ankle. They knew he was wearing the monocle so that he could furrow his brow and make it difficult to see that he had only one long eyebrow over his shiny, shiny eyes. And they knew that he was wearing a pinstripe suit so that people would think he was a rich, in person who belonged on Dark Avenue, instead of a greedy, treacherous villain who belonged in a heavily guarded prison.

“You must be children, please,” he continued, using the word “please” incorrectly for the second time. “The name of mine is Gunther. Please excuse the talking of me. Please, I am not fluent in the English language, please.”

“How…” Violet said, and then stopped. She was was still stunned, and it was difficult to finish the sentence “How did you find us so quickly, and how did you get past the doorman, who promised to keep you away from us?” while under the element of surprise.

“Where…” Klaus said, and then stopped. He was as stunned as his sister, and he found it impossible to finish the sentence “Where have you put the Quagmire triplets?” while under the element of surprise.

“Bik…” Sunny said, and stopped. The element of surprise weighed down on the youngest Baudelaire as heavily as it did on Violet and Klaus, and Sunny could not find the words to finish the sentence “Bikayado?” which meant something like “What new evil plan have you cooked up to steal our fortune?”

“I see you are not fluent in the English language either, please,” Count Olaf said, continuing to fake a different way of talking. “Where is the mother and father?”

“We’re not the mother and father,” Esmé said, and the Baudelaires felt another element of surprise as the Squalors walked into the hallway from another door. “We’re the legal guardians. These children are orphans, Gunther.”

“Ah!” From behind his monocle, Count Olaf’s eyes grew even shinier, as they often did when he was looking down on the helpless Baudelaires. The children felt as if his eyes were a pair of lit matches, about to burn them to a crisp. “Orphans in!” he said.

“I know orphans are in,” Esmé said, ignoring Olaf’s improper grammar. “In fact, they’re so in they ought to be auctioned off next week at the big event!”

“Esmé!” Jerome said. “I’m shocked! We’re not going to auction off these children.”

“Of course we’re not,” Esmé said. “It’s against the law to auction off children. Oh, well. Come along, Gunther. I’ll give you a full tour of our apartment. Jerome, take the children to Café Salmonella.”

“But we haven’t even introduced them,” Jerome said. “Violet, Klaus, Sunny—meet Gunther, the auctioneer we were talking about earlier. Gunther, meet the newest members of our family.”

“I am happy to meet you, please,” Olaf said, reaching out one of his scraggly hands.

“We’ve met before,” Violet said, happy to see that the element of surprise was fading away and that she was finding the courage to speak up. “*Many* times before. Jerome and Esmé, this man is an impostor. He’s not Gunther and he’s not an auctioneer. This is Count Olaf.”

“I am not understanding, please, what the orphan is saying,” Olaf said. “Please, I am not fluent in the English language, please.”

“Yes you are,” said Klaus, who also found himself feeling more courageous than surprised. “You speak English perfectly.”

“Why, Klaus, I’m surprised at you!” Jerome said. “A well-read person such as yourself should know he made a few grammatical errors.”

“Waran!” Sunny shrieked.

“My sister is right,” Violet said. “His improper English is just part of his disguise. If you make him take off his boots, you’ll see his tattoo, and if you make him take off his monocle, his brow will unfurrow, and—”

“Gunther is one of the innest auctioneers in the world,” Esmé said impatiently. “He told me so himself. I’m not going to make him get undressed just to make you feel better. Now shake Gunther’s hand, and go off to dinner and we’ll say no more about it.”

“He’s not Gunther, I tell you!” Klaus cried. “He’s Count Olaf.”

“I am not knowing what you are saying, please,” Count Olaf said, shrugging his scrawny shoulders.

“Esmé,” Jerome said hesitantly. “How can we be sure this man is really who he says he is? The children do seem quite alarmed. Perhaps we should —”

“Perhaps we should listen to me,” Esmé said, pointing one long-nailed finger at herself. “I am Esmé Gigi Geniveve Squalor, the city’s sixth most important financial advisor. I live on Dark Avenue, and I am unbelievably wealthy.”

“I know that, dear,” Jerome said. “I live with you.”

“Well, if you want to continue to live with me, you will call this man by his proper name, and this goes for you three children as well. I go to the trouble of buying you some smashing pinstripe suits, and you start accusing people of being in disguise!”

“It is O.K., please,” Count Olaf said. “The children are confused.”

“We’re not confused, Olaf,” Violet said.

Esmé turned to Violet and gave her an angry glare. “You and your siblings will call this man Gunther,” she ordered, “or you will make me very, very sorry I took you into my glamorous home.”

Violet looked at Klaus, and then at Sunny, and quickly made a decision. Arguing with somebody is never pleasant, but sometimes it is useful and necessary to do so. Just the other day, for example, it was useful and necessary for me to have an unpleasant argument with a medical student, because if he hadn't let me borrow his speedboat I would now be chained inside a very small, waterproof room, instead of sitting in a typewriter factory typing out this woeful tale. But Violet realized that it was neither useful nor necessary to argue with Esmé, because her guardian had clearly made up her mind about Gunther. It would be more useful and necessary to leave the penthouse and try to figure out what to do about the reappearance of this dreadful villain, instead of standing there and bickering over what name to call him, so Violet took a deep breath and smiled up at the man who had brought so much trouble into the Baudelaire lives.

"I'm sorry, Gunther," she said, almost choking on her false apology.

"But—" Klaus started to argue, but Violet gave him a look that meant the Baudelaires would discuss the matter later, when there weren't any adults around. "That's right," he said quickly, understanding his sister's glance at once. "We thought you were someone else, sir."

Gunther reached up to his face and adjusted his monocle. "O.K., please," he said.

"It's so much nicer when no one is arguing," Jerome said. "Come on, children, let's go to dinner. Gunther and Esmé have to plan the auction, and they need the apartment to themselves."

"Let me just take a minute to roll up my sleeves," Klaus replied. "Our suits are a little big."

"First you complain that Gunther is an impostor, then you complain about your suits," Esmé said, rolling her eyes. "I guess it goes to show you that orphans can be in and rude at the same time. Come on, Gunther, let me show you the rest of my glorious apartment."

"See you later, please," Gunther said to the children, his eyes shining brightly, and gave them a little wave as he followed Esmé down the hallway. Jerome waved back, but as soon as Gunther was around the corner, he leaned in close to the children.

“That was very nice of you to stop arguing with Esmé,” he said. “I could tell that you weren’t completely convinced you had made a mistake about Gunther. But don’t worry. There is something we can do to set your minds at ease.”

The Baudelaires looked at one another and smiled in relief. “Oh, thank you, Jerome,” Violet said. “What did you have in mind?”

Jerome smiled, and knelt down to help Violet roll up the legs of her suit. “I wonder if you can guess,” he said.

“We could make Gunther take off his boots,” she said, “and we could see if he had Olaf’s tattoo.”

“Or we could make him remove his monocle and unfurrow his brow,” Klaus said, as he rolled up his sleeves, “and we could get a better look at his eyebrow situation.”

“Resyca!” Sunny said, which meant something like “Or you could simply ask him to leave the penthouse, and never return!”

“Well, I don’t know what ‘Resyca!’ means,” Jerome said, “but we’re not going to do those other things. Gunther is a guest, and we don’t want to be rude to him.”

The Baudelaires actually did want to be rude to him, but they knew it was rude to say so. “Then what will set our minds at ease?” Violet asked.

“Instead of climbing down all those stairs,” Jerome said, “we can slide down the banister! It’s great fun, and whenever I do it, it takes my mind off my troubles, no matter what they are. Follow me!”

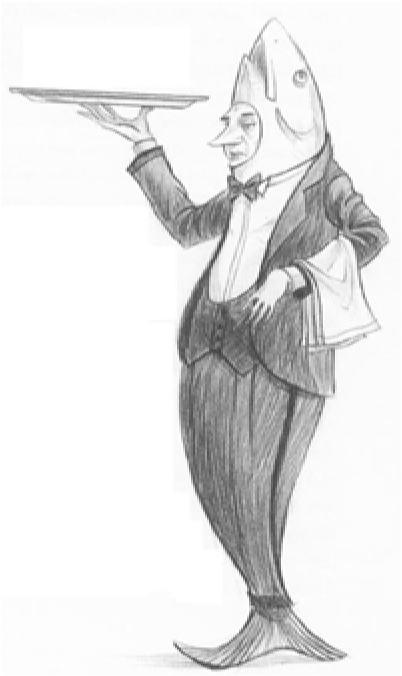
Sliding down a banister, of course, was not going to make the Baudelaires feel any better about an evil person lurking around their home, but before any of them could say so, Jerome was already leading the way out of the penthouse. “Come on, Baudelaires!” he called, and the children followed him as he walked quickly down the hallway, through four sitting rooms, across a kitchen, past nine bedrooms, and finally out of the apartment. He led the youngsters past the two pairs of elevator doors to the top of the staircase, and sat on the banister with a wide grin.

“I’ll go first,” he said, “so you’ll see how it’s done. Be careful on the curvy parts, and if you’re going too fast you can slow yourself down by scraping your shoes along the wall. Don’t be scared!”

Jerome gave himself a push, and in a second he had slid out of view, his laughter echoing off the stairwell as he raced down toward the lobby. The children looked down the stairway and felt their hearts sink with fear. It was not the fear of sliding down the banister. The Baudelaires had slid down plenty of banisters, and although they had never slid down one that was either forty-eight or eighty-four stories high, they were not scared to try, particularly now that regular light was in so they could see where they were going. But they were afraid nonetheless. They were afraid that Gunther had a clever and nasty scheme to get his hands on the Baudelaire fortune, and that they didn’t have the faintest idea of what it was. They were afraid that something dreadful had happened to the Quagmire triplets, because Gunther seemed to have time to find the Baudelaires here in their new home. And they were afraid that the Squalors would not be of any assistance in keeping the three children safe from Gunther’s crooked clutches.

Jerome’s laughter grew fainter and fainter as he slid farther and farther away, and as they stood together without a word and looked down the stairway, which curved and curved and curved as far as their eyes could see, the Baudelaire orphans were afraid that it was all downhill from here.

CHAPTER
Five



Café Salmonella was located in the Fish District, which was a part of the city that looked, sounded, smelled, and—if you were to kneel down and lick its streets—probably tasted like fish. The Fish District smelled like fish because it was located near the docks of the city, where fishermen sold the fish they had caught each morning. It sounded like fish because the pavement was always wet from the sea breeze, and the feet of passersby made bubbly, splashy sounds that resembled the noises made by sea creatures. And it looked like fish because all of the buildings in the Fish District were made of shiny, silvery scales, instead of bricks or wooden planks. When the Baudelaire orphans arrived at the Fish District and followed Jerome to Café Salmonella, they had to look up at the evening sky to remind themselves that they were not underwater.

Café Salmonella was not just a restaurant, but a theme restaurant, which simply means a restaurant with food and decorations that follow a certain idea. The theme for Café Salmonella—and you can probably guess this from its name—was salmon. There were pictures of salmon on the walls, and drawings of salmon on the menu, and the waiters and waitresses were dressed up in salmon costumes, which made it difficult for them to carry plates and trays. The tables were decorated with vases full of salmon, instead of flowers, and of course all of the food that Café Salmonella served had something to do with salmon. There is nothing particularly wrong with salmon, of course, but like caramel candy, strawberry yogurt, and liquid carpet cleaner, if you eat too much of it you are not going to enjoy your meal. And so it was that evening with the Baudelaire orphans. Their costumed waiter first brought bowls of creamy salmon soup to the table, and then some chilled salmon salad and then some broiled salmon served with salmon ravioli in a salmon butter sauce for a main course, and by the time the waiter brought over salmon pie with a scoop of salmon ice cream on top the children never wanted to have another bite of salmon again. But even if the meal had featured a variety of foods, all cooked deliciously and brought by a waiter dressed in a simple, comfortable outfit, the Baudelaires would not have enjoyed their dinner, because the thought of Gunther spending the evening alone with their guardian made them lose their appetite far more than too much pink, flavorful fish, and Jerome was simply not willing to discuss the matter any further.

“I am simply not willing to discuss the matter any further,” Jerome said, taking a sip from his water glass, which had chunks of frozen salmon floating in it instead of ice cubes. “And frankly, Baudelaires, I think you should be a little ashamed of your suspicions. Do you know what the word ‘xenophobe’ means?”

Violet and Sunny shook their heads, and looked over at their brother, who was trying to remember if he had come across the word in one of his books. “When a word ends in ‘-phobe,’” Klaus said, wiping his mouth with a salmon-shaped napkin, “it usually means somebody who is afraid of something. Does ‘xeno’ mean ‘Olaf’?”

“No,” Jerome said. “It means ‘stranger,’ or ‘foreigner.’ A xenophobe is somebody who is afraid of people just because they come from a different country, which is a silly reason for fear. I would have thought that you three would be far too sensible to be xenophobes. After all, Violet, Galileo came from a country in Europe, and he invented the telescope. Would you be afraid of him?”

“No,” Violet said. “I’d be honored to meet him. But—”

“And Klaus,” Jerome continued, “surely you’ve heard of the writer Junichiro Tanizaki, who came from a country in Asia. Would you be afraid of him?”

“Of course not,” Klaus said. “But—”

“And Sunny,” Jerome continued. “The sharp-toothed mountain lion can be found in a number of countries in North America. Would you be afraid if you met a mountain lion?”

“Netesh,” Sunny said, which meant something like “Of course I would! Mountain lions are wild animals,” but Jerome continued talking as if he hadn’t heard a word she said.

“I don’t mean to scold you,” he said. “I know you’ve had a very difficult time since your parents’ death, and Esmé and I want to do all we can to provide a good, safe home for you. I don’t think Count Olaf would dare come to our fancy neighborhood, but in case he does, the doorman will spot him and alert the authorities immediately.”

“But the doorman didn’t spot him,” Violet insisted. “He was in disguise.”

“And Olaf would dare to go anywhere to find us,” Klaus added. “It doesn’t matter how fancy the neighborhood is.”

Jerome looked uncomfortably at the children. “Please don’t argue with me,” he said. “I can’t stand arguing.”

“But sometimes it’s useful and necessary to argue,” Violet said.

“I can’t think of a single argument that would be useful or necessary,” Jerome said. “For instance, Esmé made reservations for us here at Café Salmonella, and I can’t stand the taste of salmon. I could have argued with her about that, of course, but why would it be useful or necessary?”

“Well, you could have had a dinner that you enjoyed,” Klaus said.

Jerome shook his head. “Someday, when you’re older, you’ll understand,” he said. “In the meantime, do you remember which salmon is our waiter? It’s close to your bedtime, and I’d like to pay the bill and take you home.”

The Baudelaire orphans looked at one another in frustration and sadness. They were frustrated from trying to convince Jerome of Gunther’s true identity, and they were sad because they knew it was no use to keep on trying. They scarcely said another word as Jerome ushered them out of Café Salmonella and into a taxicab that drove them out of the Fish District to 667 Dark Avenue. On the way, the taxicab passed the beach where the Baudelaires had first heard the terrible news about the fire, a time that seemed in the very, very distant past, even though it had not been all that long ago, and as the children stared out the window at the ocean waves rippling along the dark, dark beach, they missed their parents more than ever. If the Baudelaire parents had been alive, they would have listened to their children. They would have believed them when they told them who Gunther really was. But what made the Baudelaires saddest of all was the fact that if the Baudelaire parents had been alive, the three siblings would not even know who Count Olaf was, let alone be the objects of his treacherous and greedy plans. Violet, Klaus, and Sunny sat in the taxi and stared mournfully out the window, and they wished with all their might that they could return to the time when their lives were happy and carefree.

“You’re back already?” the doorman asked, as he opened the door of the taxi with a hand still hidden in the sleeve of his coat. “Mrs. Squalor said that you were not supposed to return until your guest left the penthouse, and he hasn't come down yet."

Jerome looked at his watch and frowned. "It's quite late," he said. "The children should be in bed soon. I'm sure if we're very quiet, we won't disturb them."

"I had very strict instructions," the doorman said. "Nobody is supposed to enter the penthouse apartment until the guest leaves the building, which he definitely has not done."

"I don't want to argue with you," Jerome said. "But perhaps he's on his way down now. It takes a long time to get down all those stairs, unless you're sliding down the banister. So it might be O.K. for us to go up."

"I never thought of that," the doorman said, scratching his chin with his sleeve. "All right, I guess you can go up. Maybe you'll run into him on the stairs."

The Baudelaire children looked at one another. They weren't sure which made them more nervous—the idea that Gunther had spent so much time in the Squalor penthouse, or the idea that they might meet him as he came down the stairs. "Maybe we *should* wait for Gunther to leave," Violet said. "We don't want the doorman to get in trouble."

"No, no," Jerome decided. "We'd best start the climb or we'll be too tired to reach the top. Sunny, be sure to let me know when you want me to carry you."

They walked into the lobby of the building and were surprised to see that it had been completely redecorated while they were at dinner. All the walls were painted blue, and the floor was covered in sand, with a few seashells scattered in the corners.

"Ocean decorating is in," the doorman explained. "I just got the phone call today. By tomorrow, the lobby will be filled with underwater scenery."

"I wish we'd known about this earlier," Jerome said. "We would have brought something back from the Fish District."

"Oh, I wish you had," the doorman said. "Everybody wants ocean decorations now, and they're getting hard to find."

"There are sure to be some ocean decorations for sale at the In Auction," Jerome said, as he and the Baudelaires reached the beginning of the stairway. "Maybe you should stop by and purchase something for the lobby."

"Maybe I will," the doorman said, smiling oddly at the children. "Maybe I will. Have a good evening, folks."

The Baudelaires said good night to the doorman, and began the long climb up the stairs. Up and up and up they climbed, and they passed a number of people who were on their way down, but although all of them were in pinstripe suits, none of them were Gunther. As the children climbed higher and higher, the people going down the stairs looked more and more tired, and each time the Baudelaires passed an apartment door, they heard the sounds of people getting ready for bed. On the seventeenth floor, they heard somebody ask their mother where the bubble bath was. On the thirty-eighth floor, they heard the sounds of somebody brushing their teeth. And on a floor very high up—the children had lost count again, but it must have been quite high, because Jerome was carrying Sunny—they heard someone with a deep, deep voice, reading a children's story out loud. All these sounds made them sleepier and sleepier, and by the time they reached the top floor the Baudelaire orphans were so tired it felt as if they were sleepwalking, or, in Sunny's case, being sleep-carried. They were so tired that they almost dozed off, leaning against the two sets of sliding elevator doors, as Jerome unlocked the front door. And they were so tired that it seemed as if Gunther's appearance had been a dream, because when they asked about him, Esmé replied that he had left a long time ago.

"Gunther left?" Violet asked. "But the doorman said that he was still here."

“Oh, no,” Esmé said. “He dropped off a catalog of all the items for the In Auction. It’s in the library if you want to look at it. We went over some auctioneering details, and then he went home.”

“But that can’t be,” Jerome said.

“Of course it can be,” Esmé replied. “He walked right out the front door.”

The Baudelaires looked at one another in confusion and suspicion. How had Gunther managed to leave the penthouse without being spotted? “Did he take an elevator when he left?” Klaus said.

Esmé’s eyes widened, and she opened and shut her mouth several times without saying anything, as if she were experiencing the element of surprise. “No,” she said finally. “The elevator’s been shut down. You know that.”

“But the doorman said he was still here,” Violet said again. “And we didn’t see him when we walked up the stairs.”

“Well, then the doorman was wrong,” Esmé said. “But let’s not have any more of this somniferous conversation. Jerome, put them right to bed.”

The Baudelaires looked at one another. They didn’t think the conversation was at all somniferous, a fancy word for something that is so boring it puts you to sleep. Despite their exhausting climb, the children did not feel the least bit tired when they were talking about Gunther’s whereabouts. The idea that he had managed to disappear as mysteriously as he had appeared made them too anxious to be sleepy. But the three siblings knew that they would not be able to convince the Squalors to discuss it any futher, any more than they had been able to convince them that Gunther was Count Olaf instead of an in auctioneer, so they said good night to Esmé and followed Jerome across three ballrooms, past a breakfast room, through two sitting rooms, and eventually to their own bedrooms.

“Good night, children,” Jerome said, and smiled. “The three of you will probably sleep like logs, after all that climbing. I don’t mean that you resemble parts of trees, of course. I just mean that once you get into bed, I bet you'll fall right asleep and won't move any more than a log does."

"We know what you meant, Jerome," Klaus replied, "and I hope you're right. Good night."

Jerome smiled at the children, and the children smiled back, and then looked at each other once more before walking into their bedrooms and shutting the doors behind them. The children knew that they would not sleep like logs, unless there were certain logs that tossed and turned all night wondering things. The siblings wondered where Gunther was hiding, and how he had managed to find them, and what terrible treachery he was dreaming up. They wondered where the Quagmire triplets were, since Gunther had time to prey on the Baudelaires. And they wondered what V.F.D. could mean, and if it would help them with Gunther if they knew. The Baudelaires tossed and turned, and wondered about all these things, and as it grew later and later they felt less and less like logs and more and more like children in a sinister and mysterious plot, spending one of the least somniferous nights of their young lives.

CHAPTER
Six

Morning is one of the best times for thinking. When one has just woken up, but hasn't yet gotten out of bed, it is a perfect time to look up at the ceiling, consider one's life, and wonder what the future will hold. The morning I am writing this chapter, I am wondering if the future will hold something that will enable me to saw through these handcuffs and crawl out of the double-locked window, but in the case of the Baudelaire orphans, when the morning sun shone through the eight hundred and forty-nine windows in the Squalor penthouse, they were wondering if the future would hold knowledge of the trouble they felt closing in around them. Violet watched the first few rays of sunlight brighten her sturdy, tool-free workbench, and tried to imagine what sort of evil plan Gunther had cooked up. Klaus watched the dawn's rays make shifting shapes on the wall that separated his room from the Squalor library, and racked his brain for a way Gunther could have vanished into thin air. And Sunny watched the emerging sun illuminate all of the unbiteable baby toys, and tried to figure out if they had time to discuss the matter together before the Squalors came to wake them up.

This last thing was fairly easy to figure out. The littlest Baudelaire crawled out her bedroom door, fetched her brother, and opened Violet's door to find her out of bed and sitting at her wooden workbench with her hair tied up in a ribbon to keep it out of her eyes.

"Tageb," Sunny said.

"Good morning," Violet replied. "I thought it might help me think if I tied my hair up, and sat at my workbench, as if I were inventing something. But I haven't figured out a thing."

"It's terrible enough that Olaf has shown up again," Klaus said, "and that we have to call him Gunther. But we don't have the faintest clue what he's planning."

"Well, he wants to get his hands on our fortune, that's for sure," Violet said.

"Klofy," Sunny said, which meant "Of course. But how?"

"Maybe it has something to do with the In Auction," Klaus guessed. "Why would he disguise himself as an auctioneer if it weren't part of his plan?"

Sunny yawned, and Violet reached down and lifted up her sister so she could sit on her lap. "Do you think he's going to try to auction us off?" Violet asked, as Sunny leaned forward to nibble on the workbench in thought. "He could get one of those terrible assistants of his to bid higher and higher for us until he won, and then we'd be in his clutches, just like the poor Quagmires."

"But Esmé said it's against the law to auction off children," Klaus pointed out.

Sunny stopped chewing on the workbench and looked at her siblings. "Nolano?" she asked, which meant something like "Do you think the Squalors are working together with Gunther?"

“I don’t think so,” Violet said. “They’ve been very kind to us—well, Jerome has, at least—and anyway, they don’t need the Baudelaire fortune. They have so much money already.”

“But not much common sense,” Klaus said unhappily. “Gunther fooled them completely, and all it took were some black boots, a pinstripe suit, and a monocle.”

“Plus, he fooled them into thinking that he had left,” Violet said, “but the doorman was certain that he hadn’t.”

“Gunther’s got me fooled, too,” Klaus said. “How could he have left without the doorman noticing?”

“I don’t know,” Violet said miserably. “The whole thing is like a jigsaw puzzle, but there are too many missing pieces to solve it.”

“Did I hear someone say ‘jigsaw puzzles’?” Jerome asked. “If you’re looking for some jigsaw puzzles, I think there are a few in the cabinet in one of the sitting rooms, or maybe in one of the living rooms, I can’t remember which.”

The Baudelaires looked up and saw their guardian standing in the doorway of Violet’s bedroom with a smile on his face and a silver tray in his hands.

“Good morning, Jerome,” Klaus said. “And thank you, but we’re not looking for a jigsaw puzzle. Violet was just using an expression. We’re trying to figure something out.”

“Well, you’ll never figure anything out on an empty stomach,” Jerome replied. “I have some breakfast here for you: three poached eggs and some nice whole wheat toast.”

“Thank you,” Violet said. “It’s very nice of you to fix us breakfast.”

“You’re very welcome,” Jerome replied. “Esmé has an important meeting with the King of Arizona today, so we have the whole day to ourselves. I thought we could walk across town to the Clothing District, and take your pinstripe suits to a good tailor. There's no use having those suits if they don't fit you properly."

"Knilliu!" Sunny shrieked, which meant "That's very considerate of you."

"I don't know what 'Knilliu!' means," Esmé said, walking into the bedroom, "and I don't care, but neither will you when you hear the fantastic news I just received on the phone! Aqueous martinis are out, and parsley soda is in!"

"Parsley soda?" Jerome said, frowning. "That sounds terrible. I think I'll stick to aqueous martinis."

"You're not listening," Esmé said. "Parsley soda is in now. You'll have to go out right now and buy a few crates of it."

"But I was going to take the children's suits to the tailor today," Jerome said.

"Then you'll have to change your plans," Esmé said impatiently. "The children already have clothing, but we don't have any parsley soda."

"Well, I don't want to argue," Jerome said.

"Then don't argue," Esmé replied. "And don't take the children with you, either. The Beverage District is no place for young people. Well, we'd better go, Jerome. I don't want to be late for His Arizona Highness."

"But don't you want to spend some time with the Baudelaires before the work day begins?" Jerome asked.

"Not particularly," Esmé said, and looked briefly at her watch. "I'll just say good morning to them. Good morning. Well, let's go, Jerome."

Jerome opened his mouth as if he had something else to say, but Esmé was already marching out of the bedroom, so he just shrugged. "Have a good day," he said to the children. "There's food in all of our kitchens, so you can make yourselves lunch. I’m sorry that our plans didn’t work out after all.”

“Hurry up!” Esmé called, from down the hallway, and Jerome ran out of the room. The children heard their guardians’ footsteps grow fainter and fainter as they made their way to the front door.

“Well,” Klaus said, when they couldn’t hear them anymore, “what shall we do today?”

“Vinfrey,” Sunny said.

“Sunny’s right,” Violet said. “We’d better spend the day figuring out what Gunther’s up to.”

“How can we know what he’s up to,” Klaus said, “when we don’t even know where he is?”

“Well, we’d better find out,” Violet said. “He already had the unfair advantage of the element of surprise, and we don’t want him to have the unfair advantage of a good hiding place.”

“This penthouse has lots of good hiding places,” Klaus said. “There are so many rooms.”

“Koundix,” Sunny said, which meant something like “But he can’t be in the penthouse. Esmé saw him leave.”

“Well, maybe he sneaked back in,” Violet said, “and is lurking around right now.”

The Baudelaires looked at one another, and then at Violet’s doorway, half expecting to see Gunther standing there looking at them with his shiny, shiny eyes.

“If he was lurking around here,” Klaus said, “wouldn’t he have grabbed us the instant the Squalors went out?”

“Maybe,” Violet said. “If that was his plan.”

The Baudelaires looked at the empty doorway again.

“I’m scared,” Klaus said.

“Ecrif!” Sunny agreed.

“I’m scared, too,” Violet admitted, “but if he’s here in the penthouse, we’d better find out. We’ll have to search the entire place and see if we find him.”

“I don’t want to find him,” Klaus said. “Let’s run downstairs and call Mr. Poe instead.”

“Mr. Poe is in a helicopter, looking for the Quagmire triplets,” Violet said. “By the time he returns it may be too late. We have to figure out what Gunther is up to—not only for our sake, but for the sake of Isadora and Duncan.”

At the mention of the Quagmire triplets, all three Baudelaires felt a stiffening of their resolve, a phrase which here means “realized that they had to search the penthouse for Gunther, even though it was a scary thing to do.” The children remembered how hard Duncan and Isadora had worked to save them from Olaf’s clutches back at Prufrock Preparatory School, doing absolutely everything they could to help the Baudelaires escape Olaf’s evil plan. The Quagmires had sneaked out in the middle of the night and put themselves in grave danger. The Quagmires had put on disguises, risking their lives in order to try to fool Olaf. And the Quagmires had done a lot of researching, finding out the secret of V.F.D.—although they had been snatched away before they could reveal the secret to the Baudelaires. Violet, Klaus, and Sunny thought about the two brave and loyal triplets, and knew they had to be just as brave and loyal, now that they had an opportunity to save their friends.

“You’re right,” Klaus said to Violet, and Sunny nodded in agreement. “We have to search the penthouse. But it’s such a complicated place. I get lost just trying to find the bathroom at night. How can we search without getting lost?”

“Hansel!” Sunny said.

The two older Baudelaires looked at one another. It was rare that Sunny said something that her siblings couldn’t understand, but this seemed to be one of those times.

“Do you mean we should draw a map?” Violet asked.

Sunny shook her head. “Gretel!” she said.

“That’s two times we don’t understand you,” Klaus said. “Hansel and Gretel? What does that mean?”

“Oh!” Violet cried suddenly. “Hansel and Gretel means Hansel and Gretel—you know, those two dim-witted children in that fairy tale.”

“Of course,” Klaus said. “That brother and sister who insist on wandering around the woods by themselves.”

“Leaving a trail of bread crumbs,” Violet said, picking up a piece of toast from the breakfast tray Jerome had brought them, “so they don’t get lost. We’ll crumble up this toast and leave a few crumbs in every room so we know we’ve already searched it. Good thinking, Sunny.”

“Blized,” Sunny said modestly, which meant something like “It’s nothing,” and I’m sorry to say she turned out to be right. For as the children wandered from bedroom to living room to dining room to breakfast room to snack room to sitting room to standing room to ballroom to bathroom to kitchen to those rooms that seemed to have no purpose at all, and back again, leaving trails of toast crumbs wherever they went, Gunther was nowhere to be found. They looked in the closets of each bedroom, and the cabinets in each kitchen, and even pulled back the shower curtains in each bathroom to see if Gunther was hiding behind them. They saw racks of clothes in the closets, cans of food in the cabinets, and bottles of cream rinse in the shower, but the children had to admit, as the morning ended and the Baudelaires’ own trail of crumbs led them back to Violet’s room, that they had found nothing.

“Where in the world can Gunther be hiding?” Klaus asked. “We’ve looked everywhere.”

“Maybe he was moving around,” Violet said. “He could have been in a room behind us all the time, jumping into the hiding places we already checked.”

“I don’t think so,” Klaus said. “We surely would have heard him if he was clomping around in those silly boots. I don’t think he’s been in this penthouse since last night. Esmé insists that he left the apartment, but the doorman insists that he didn’t. It doesn’t add up.”

“I’ve been thinking that over,” Violet said. “I think it might add up. Esmé insists that he left the *penthouse*. The doorman insists that he didn’t leave the *building*. That means he could be in any of the other apartments at 667 Dark Avenue.”

“You’re right,” Klaus said. “Maybe he rented one of the apartments on another floor, as a headquarters for his latest scheme.”

“Or maybe one of the apartments belongs to someone in his theater troupe,” Violet said, and counted those terrible people on her fingers “There’s the hook-handed man, or the bald man with the long nose, or that one who looks like neither a man nor a woman.”

“Or maybe those two dreadful powder-faced women—the ones who helped kidnap the Quagmires—are roommates,” Klaus said.

“Co,” Sunny said, which meant something like “Or maybe Gunther managed to trick one of the other residents of 667 Dark Avenue into letting him into their apartment, and then he tied them up and is sitting there hiding in the kitchen.”

“If we find Gunther in the building,” Violet said, “then at least the Squalors will know that he is a liar. Even if they don’t believe he’s really Count Olaf, they’ll be very suspicious if he’s caught hiding in another apartment.”

“But how are we going to find out?” Klaus asked. “We can’t simply knock on doors and ask to see each apartment.”

“We don’t have to *see* each apartment,” Violet said. “We can *listen* to them.”

Klaus and Sunny looked at their sister in confusion for a moment, and then began to grin. “You’re right!” Klaus said. “If we walk down the stairs, listening at every door, we may be able to tell if Gunther is inside.”

“Lorigo!” Sunny shrieked, which meant “What are we waiting for? Let’s go!”

“Not so fast,” Klaus said. “It’s a long trip down all those stairs, and we’ve already done a lot of walking—and crawling, in your case, Sunny. We’d better change into our sturdiest shoes, and bring along some extra pairs of socks. That way we can avoid blisters.”

“And we should bring some water,” Violet said, “so we won’t get thirsty.”

“Snack!” Sunny shrieked, and the Baudelaire orphans went to work, changing out of their pajamas and into appropriate stair-climbing outfits, putting on their sturdiest shoes, and tucking pairs of extra socks into their pockets. After Violet and Klaus made sure that Sunny had tied her shoes correctly, the children left their bedrooms and followed their crumbs down the hallway, through a living room, past two bedrooms, down another hallway, and into the nearest kitchen, sticking together the whole time so they wouldn’t lose one another in the enormous penthouse. In the kitchen they found some grapes, a box of crackers, and a jar of apple butter, as well as a bottle of water that the Squalors used for making aqueous martinis but that the Baudelaires would use to quench their thirst during their long climb. Finally, they left the penthouse apartment, walked past the sliding elevator doors, and stood at the top of the curving stairway, feeling more like they were about to go mountain climbing than downstairs.

“We’ll have to tiptoe,” Violet said, “so that we can hear Gunther, but he can’t hear us.”

“And we should probably whisper,” Klaus whispered, “so that we can eavesdrop, without people eavesdropping on us.”

“Philavem,” Sunny said, which meant “Let’s get started,” and the Baudelaires got started, tiptoeing down the first curve of the stairway and listening at the door of the apartment directly below the penthouse. For a few seconds, they heard nothing, but then, very clearly, they heard a woman talking on the phone.

“Well, that’s not Gunther,” Violet whispered. “He’s not a woman.”

Klaus and Sunny nodded, and the children tiptoed down the next curve to the floor below. As soon as they reached the next door, it flung open to reveal a very short man in a pinstripe suit. “See you later, Avery!” he called, and, with a nod to the children, shut the door and began walking down the stairs.

“That’s not Gunther either,” Klaus whispered. “He’s not that short, and he’s not calling himself Avery.”

Violet and Sunny nodded, and the children tiptoed down the next curve to the floor below the floor below. They stopped and listened at this door, and heard a man’s voice call out, “I’m going to take a shower, Mother,” and Sunny shook her head.

“Mineak,” she whispered, which meant “Gunther would never take a shower. He’s filthy.”

Violet and Klaus nodded, and the children tiptoed down the next curve, and then the next, and the next and plenty more after that, listening at each door, whispering briefly to one another, and moving on. As they walked farther and farther down the stairway, they began to grow tired, as they always did when making their way to or from the Squalors’ apartment, but this time they had additional hardships as well. The tips of their toes grew tired from all that tiptoeing. Their throats grew hoarse from all that whispering. Their ears were aching from listening at all those doors, and their chins drooped from nodding in agreement that nothing they heard sounded like Gunther. The morning wore on, and the Baudelaires tiptoed and listened, whispered and nodded, and by the time they reached the lobby of the building, it seemed that every physical feature of the Baudelaire orphans was suffering in some way from the long climb.

“That was exhausting,” Violet said, sitting down on the bottom step and passing around the bottle of water. “Exhausting and fruitless.”

“Grape!” Sunny said.

“No, no, Sunny,” Violet said. “I didn’t mean we didn’t have any fruit. I just meant we didn’t learn anything. Do you think we missed a door?”

“No,” Klaus said, shaking his head and passing around the crackers. “I made sure. I even counted the number of floors this time, so we could double-check them on the way up. It’s not forty-eight, or eighty-four. It’s sixty-six, which happens to be the average of those two numbers. Sixty-six floors and sixty-six doors and not a peep from Gunther behind any of them.”

“I don’t understand it,” Violet said miserably. “If he’s not in the penthouse, and he’s not in any of the other apartments, and he hasn’t left the building, where could he be?”

“Maybe he *is* in the penthouse,” Klaus said, “and we just didn’t spot him.”

“Bishuy,” Sunny said, which meant “Or maybe he *is* in one of the other apartments, and we just didn’t hear him.”

“Or maybe he *has* left the building,” Violet said, spreading apple butter on a cracker and giving it to Sunny. “We can ask the doorman. There he is.”

Sure enough, the doorman was at his usual post by the door, and was just noticing the three exhausted children sitting on the bottom step. “Hello there,” he said, walking up to them and smiling from beneath the wide brim of his hat. Sticking out of his long sleeves were a small starfish carved out of wood, and a bottle of glue. “I was just going to put up this ocean decoration when I thought I heard someone walking down the stairs.”

“We just thought we’d have lunch here in the lobby,” Violet said, not wanting to admit that she and her siblings had been listening at doors, “and then hike back up.”

“I’m sorry, but that means that you’re not allowed back up to the penthouse,” the doorman said, and shrugged his shoulders inside his oversized coat. “You’ll have to stay here in the lobby. After all, my instructions were very clear: You were not supposed to return to the Squalor penthouse until the guest left. I let you go up last night because Mr. Squalor said that your guest was probably on his way down, but he was wrong, because Gunther never showed up in the lobby.”

“You mean Gunther still hasn’t left the building?” Violet asked.

“Of course not,” the doorman said. “I’m here all day and all night, and I haven’t seen him leave. I promise you that Gunther never walked out of this door.”

“When do you sleep?” Klaus asked.

“I drink a lot of coffee,” the doorman answered.

“It just doesn’t make any sense,” Violet said.

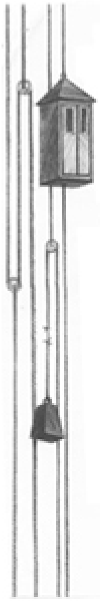
“Sure it does,” the doorman said. “Coffee contains caffeine, which is a chemical stimulant. Stimulants keep people awake.”

“I didn’t mean the part about the coffee,” Violet said. “I meant the part about Gunther. Esmé—that’s Mrs. Squalor—is positive that he left the penthouse last night, while we were at the restaurant. But you are equally positive that he didn’t leave the building. It’s a problem that doesn’t seem to have a solution.”

“Every problem has a solution,” the doorman said. “At least, that’s what a close associate of mine says. Sometimes it just takes a long time to find the solution—even if it’s right in front of your nose.”

The doorman smiled at the Baudelaires, who watched him walk over to the sliding elevator doors. He opened the bottle of glue and made a small globby patch on one of the doors, and then held the wooden starfish against the glue in order to attach it. Gluing things to a door is never a very exciting thing to watch, and after a moment, Violet and Sunny turned their attention back to their lunch and the problem of Gunther's disappearance. Only Klaus kept looking in the direction of the doorman as he continued to decorate the lobby. The middle Baudelaire looked and looked and looked, and kept on looking even when the glue dried and the doorman went back to his post at the door. Klaus kept facing the ocean decoration that was now firmly attached to one of the elevator doors, because he realized now, after a tiring morning of searching the penthouse and an exhausting afternoon of eavesdropping on the stairs, that the doorman had been right. Klaus didn't move his face one bit, because he realized that the solution was, indeed, right in front of his nose.

CHAPTER
Seven



When you know someone a long time, you become accustomed to their idiosyncrasies, which is a fancy word for their unique habits. For instance, Sunny Baudelaire had known her sister, Violet, for quite some time, and was accustomed to Violet's idiosyncrasy of tying her hair up in a ribbon to keep it out of her eyes whenever she was inventing something. Violet had known Sunny for exactly the same length of time, and was accustomed to Sunny's idiosyncrasy of saying "Freijip?" when she wanted to ask the question "How can you think of elevators at a time like this?" And both the young Baudelaire women were very well acquainted with their brother, Klaus, and were accustomed to his idiosyncrasy of not paying a bit of attention to his surroundings when he was thinking very hard about something, as he was clearly doing as the afternoon wore on.

The doorman continued to insist that the Baudelaire orphans could not return to the penthouse, so the three children sat on the bottom step of 667

Dark Avenue’s lengthy stairwell, ate food they had brought down with them, and rested their weary legs, which had not felt this sore since Olaf, in a previous disguise, had forced them to run hundreds and hundreds of laps as part of his scheme to steal their fortune. A good thing to do when one is sitting, eating, and resting is to have a conversation, and Violet and Sunny were both eager to converse about Gunther’s mysterious appearance and disappearance, and what they might be able to do about it, but Klaus scarcely participated in the discussion. Only when his sisters asked him a direct question, such as “But where in the world could Gunther be?” or “What do you think Gunther is planning?” or “Topoing?” did Klaus mumble a response, and Violet and Sunny soon figured out that Klaus must be thinking very hard about something, so they left him to his idiosyncrasy and talked quietly to each other until the doorman ushered Jerome and Esmé into the lobby.

“Hello, Jerome,” Violet said. “Hello, Esmé.”

“Tretchev!” Sunny shrieked, which meant “Welcome home!”

Klaus mumbled something.

“What a pleasant surprise to see you all the way down here!” Jerome said. “It’ll be easier to climb all those stairs if we have you three charming people for company.”

“And you can carry the crates of parsley soda that are stacked outside,” Esmé said. “Then I don’t have to worry about breaking one of my fingernails.”

“We’d be happy to carry big crates up all those stairs,” Violet lied, “but the doorman says we’re not allowed back in the penthouse.”

“Not allowed?” Jerome frowned. “Whatever do you mean?”

“You gave me specific instructions not to let the children back in, Mrs. Squalor,” the doorman said. “At least, until Gunther left the building. And he still hasn’t left.”

“Don’t be absurd,” Esmé said. “He left the penthouse last night. What kind of doorman are you?”

“Actually, I’m an actor,” the doorman said, “but I was still able to follow your instructions.”

Esmé gave the doorman a stern look she probably used when giving people financial advice. “Your instructions have changed,” she said. “Your new instructions are to let me and my orphans go directly to my seventy-one-bedroom apartment. Got it, buster?”

“Got it,” the doorman replied meekly.

“Good,” Esmé said, and then turned to the children. “Hurry up, kids,” she said. “Violet and what’s-his-name can each take a crate of soda, and Jerome will take the rest. I guess the baby won’t be very helpful, but that’s to be expected. Let’s get a move on.”

The Baudelaires got a move on, and in a few moments the three children and the two adults were trekking up the sixty-six-floor-long staircase. The youngsters were hoping that Esmé might help carry the heavy crates of soda, but the city’s sixth most important financial advisor was much more interested in telling them all about her meeting with the King of Arizona than in buttering up any orphans. “He told me a long list of new things that are in,” Esmé squealed. “For one thing, grapefruits. Also bright blue cereal bowls, billboards with photographs of weasels on them, and plenty of other things that I will list for you right now.” All the way up to the penthouse, Esmé listed the new in items she had learned about from His Arizona Highness, and the two Baudelaire sisters listened carefully the whole time. They did not listen very carefully to Esmé’s very dull speech, of course, but they listened closely at each curve of the staircase, double-checking their eavesdropping to hear if Gunther was indeed behind one of the apartment doors. Neither Violet nor Sunny heard anything suspicious, and they would have asked Klaus, in a low whisper so the Squalors couldn’t hear them, if he had heard any sort of Gunther noise, but they could tell from his idiosyncrasy that he was still thinking very hard about something and wasn’t listening to the noises in the other apartments any more than he was listening to automobile tires, cross-country skiing, movies with waterfalls in them, and the rest of the in things Esmé was rattling off.

“Oh, and magenta wallpaper!” Esmé said, as the Baudelaires and the Squalors finished a dinner of in foods washed down with parsley soda, which tasted even nastier than it sounds. “And triangular picture frames, and very fancy doilies, and garbage cans with letters of the alphabet stenciled all over them, and—”

“Excuse me,” Klaus said, and his sisters jumped a little bit in surprise. It was the first time Klaus had spoken in anything but a mumble since they had been down in the lobby. “I don’t mean to interrupt, but my sisters and I are very tired. May we be excused to go to bed?”

“Of course,” Jerome said. “You should get plenty of rest for the auction tomorrow. I’ll take you to the Veblen Hall at ten-thirty sharp, so—”

“No you won’t,” Esmé said. “Yellow paper clips are in, Jerome, so as soon as the sun rises, you’ll have to go right to the Stationery District and get some. I’ll bring the children.”

“Well, I don’t want to argue,” Jerome said, shrugging and giving the children a small smile. “Esmé, don’t you want to tuck the children in?”

“Nope,” Esmé answered, frowning as she sipped her parsley soda. “Folding blankets over three wriggling children sounds like a lot more trouble than it’s worth. See you tomorrow, kids.”

“I hope so,” Violet said, and yawned. She knew that Klaus was asking to be excused so he could tell her and Sunny what he had been thinking about, but after lying awake the previous night, searching the entire penthouse, and tiptoeing down all those stairs, the eldest Baudelaire was actually quite tired. “Good night, Esmé. Good night, Jerome.”

“Good night, children,” Jerome said. “And please, if you get up in the middle of the night and have a snack, try not to spill your food. There seem to be a lot of crumbs around the penthouse lately.”

The Baudelaire orphans looked at one another and smiled at their shared secret. “Sorry about that,” Violet said. “Tomorrow we’ll do the vacuuming if you want.”

“Vacuum cleaners!” Esmé said. “I knew there was something else he told me was in. Oh, and cotton balls, and anything with chocolate sprinkles on it, and…”

The Baudelaires did not want to stick around for any more of Esmé’s in list, so they brought their plates into the nearest kitchen, and walked down a hallway decorated with the antlers of various animals, through a sitting room, past five bathrooms, took a left at another kitchen, and eventually made their way to Violet’s bedroom.

“O.K., Klaus,” Violet said to her brother, when the three children had found a comfortable corner for their discussion. “I know you’ve been thinking very hard about something, because you’ve been doing that unique habit of yours where you don’t pay a bit of attention to your surroundings.”

“Unique habits like that are called idiosyncrasies,” Klaus said.

“Stiblo!” Sunny cried, which meant “We can improve our vocabulary later—tell us what’s on your mind!”

“Sorry, Sunny,” Klaus said. “It’s just that I think I’ve figured out where Gunther might be hiding, but I’m not positive. First, Violet, I need to ask you something. What do you know about elevators?”

“Elevators?” Violet said. “Quite a bit, actually. My friend Ben once gave me some elevator blueprints for my birthday, and I studied them very closely. They were destroyed in the fire, of course, but I remember that an elevator is essentially a platform, surrounded by an enclosure, that moves along the vertical axis via an endlessly looped belt and a series of ropes. It’s controlled by a push-button console that regulates an electromagnetic braking system so the transport sequence can be halted at any access point the passenger desires. In other words, it’s a box that moves up or down, depending on where you want to go. But so what?”

“Freijip?” Sunny asked, which, as you know, was her idiosyncratic way of saying “How can you think of elevators at a time like this?”

“Well, it was the doorman who got me thinking about elevators,” Klaus said. “Remember when he said that sometimes the solution is right under your nose? Well, he was gluing that wooden starfish to the elevator doors right when he said that.”

“I noticed that, too,” Violet said. “It looked a little ugly.”

“It did look ugly,” Klaus agreed. “But that’s not what I mean. I got to thinking about the elevator doors. Outside the door to this penthouse, there are two pairs of elevator doors. But on every other floor, there’s only one pair.”

“That’s true,” Violet said, “and that’s odd, too, now that I think of it. That means one elevator can stop only on the top floor.”

“Yelliverc!” Sunny said, which meant “That second elevator is almost completely useless!”

“I don’t think it’s useless,” Klaus said, “because I don’t think the elevator is really there.”

“Not really there?” Violet asked. “But that would just leave an empty elevator shaft!”

“Middiow?” Sunny asked.

“An elevator shaft is the path an elevator uses to move up and down,” Violet explained to her sister. “It’s sort of like a hallway, except it goes up and down, instead of side to side.”

“And a hallway,” Klaus said, “could lead to a hiding place.”

“Aha!” Sunny cried.

“Aha is right,” Klaus agreed. “Just think, if he used an empty elevator shaft instead of the stairs, nobody would ever know where he was. I don’t think the elevator has been shut down because it’s out. I think it’s where Gunther is hiding.”

“But why is he hiding? What is he up to?” Violet asked.

“That’s the part we still don’t know,” Klaus admitted, “but I bet you the answers can be found behind those sliding doors. Let’s take a look at what’s behind the second pair of elevator doors. If we see the ropes and things you were describing, then we know it’s a real elevator. But if we don’t—”

“Then we know we’re on the right track,” Violet finished for him. “Let’s go right this minute.”

“If we go right this minute,” Klaus said, “we’ll have do it very quietly. The Squalors are not going to let three children poke around an elevator shaft.”

“It’s worth the risk, if it helps us figure out Gunther’s plan,” Violet said. I’m sorry to say that it turned out not to be worth the risk at all, but of course the Baudelaires had no way of knowing that, so they merely nodded in agreement and tiptoed toward the penthouse’s exit, peeking into each room before they went through to see if the Squalors were anywhere to be found. But Jerome and Esmé were apparently spending the evening in some room in another part of the apartment, because the Baudelaires didn’t see hide or hair of them—the expression “hide or hair of them” here means “even a glimpse of the city’s sixth most important financial advisor, or her husband”—on their way to the front door. They hoped the door would not squeak as they pushed it open, but apparently silent hinges were in, because the Baudelaires made no noise at all as they left the apartment and tiptoed over to the two pairs of sliding elevator doors.

“How do we know which elevator is which?” Violet whispered. “The pairs of doors look exactly alike.”

“I hadn’t thought of that,” Klaus replied. “If one of them is really a secret passageway, there must be some way to tell.”

Sunny tugged on the legs of her siblings' pants, which was a good way to get their attention without making any noise, and when Violet and Klaus looked down to see what their sister wanted, she answered them just as silently. Without speaking, she reached out one of her tiny fingers and pointed to the buttons that were next to each set of sliding doors. Next to one pair of doors, there was a single button, with an arrow printed on it pointing down. But next to the second pair of doors, there were two buttons: one with a Down arrow, and one with an Up arrow. The three children looked at the buttons and considered.

"Why would you need an Up button," Violet whispered, "if you were already on the top floor?" and without waiting for an answer to her question, she reached out and pressed it. With a quiet, slithery sound, the sliding doors opened, and the children leaned carefully into the doorway, and gasped at what they saw.

"Lakry," Sunny said, which meant something like "There are no ropes."

"Not only are there no ropes," Violet said. "There's no endlessly looped belt, push-button console, or electromagnetic braking system. I don't even see an enclosed platform."

"I *knew* it," Klaus said, in hushed excitement. "I *knew* the elevator was ersatz!"

"Ersatz" is a word that describes a situation in which one thing is pretending to be another, the way the secret passageway the Baudelaires were looking at had been pretending to be an elevator, but the word might as well have meant "the most terrifying place the Baudelaires had ever seen." As the children stood in the doorway and peered into the elevator shaft, it was as if they were standing on the edge of an enormous cliff, looking down at the dizzying depths below them. But what made these depths terrifying, as well as dizzying, was that they were so very dark. The shaft was more like a pit than a passageway, leading straight down into a blackness the likes of which the youngsters had never seen. It was darker than any night had ever been, even on nights when there was no moon. It was darker than Dark Avenue had been on the day of their arrival. It was darker than a pitch-black panther, covered in tar, eating black licorice at the very bottom of the deepest part of the Black Sea. The Baudelaire orphans had never dreamed that anything could be this dark, even in their scariest nightmares, and as they stood at the edge of this pit of unimaginable blackness, they felt as if the elevator shaft would simply swallow them up and they would never see a speck of light again.

“We have to go down there,” Violet said, scarcely believing the words she was saying.

“I’m not sure I have the courage to go down there,” Klaus said. “Look how dark it is. It’s terrifying.”

“Prollit,” Sunny said, which meant “But not as terrifying as what Gunther will do to us, if we don’t find out his plan.”

“Why don’t we just go tell the Squalors about this?” Klaus asked. “Then *they* can go down the secret passageway.”

“We don’t have time to argue with the Squalors,” Violet said. “Every minute we waste is a minute the Quagmires are spending in Gunther’s clutches.”

“But how are we going to go down?” Klaus asked. “I don’t see a ladder, or a staircase. I don’t see anything at all.”

“We’re going to have to climb down,” Violet said, “on a rope. But where can we find rope at this time of night? Most hardware stores close at six.”

“The Squalors must have some rope somewhere in their penthouse,” Klaus said. “Let’s split up and find some. We’ll meet back here in fifteen minutes.”

Violet and Sunny agreed, and the Baudelaires stepped carefully away from the elevator shaft and tiptoed back into the Squalor penthouse. They felt like burglars as they split up and began searching the apartment, although there have been only five burglars in the history of robbery who have specialized in rope. All five of these burglars were caught and sent to prison, which is why scarcely any people lock up their rope for safekeeping, but to their frustration, the Baudelaires learned that their guardians didn't lock up their ropes at all, for the simple reason that they didn't have any.

"I couldn't find any ropes at all," Violet admitted, as she rejoined her siblings. "But I did find these extension cords, which might work."

"I took these curtain pulls down from some of the windows," Klaus said. "They're a little bit like ropes, so I thought they might be useful."

"Armani," Sunny offered, holding up an armful of Jerome's neckties.

"Well, we have some ersatz ropes," Violet said, "for our climb down the ersatz elevator. Let's tie them all together with the Devil's Tongue."

"The Devil's Tongue?" Klaus asked.

"It's a knot," Violet explained. "It was invented by female Finnish pirates in the fifteenth century. I used it to make my grappling hook, when Olaf had Sunny trapped in that cage, dangling from his tower room, and it'll work here as well. We need to make as long a rope as possible—for all we know, the passageway goes all the way to the bottom floor of the building."

"It looks like it goes all the way to the center of the earth," Klaus said. "We've spent so much of our time trying to escape from Count Olaf. I can't believe that now we're trying to find him."

"Me neither," Violet agreed. "If it weren't for the Quagmires, I wouldn't go down there at all."

"Bangemp," Sunny reminded her siblings. She meant something along the lines of "If it weren't for the Quagmires, we would have been in his clutches a long time ago," and the two older Baudelaires nodded in agreement. Violet showed her siblings how to make the Devil's Tongue, and the three children hurriedly tied the extension cords to the curtain pulls, and the curtain pulls to the neckties, and the last necktie to the sturdiest thing they could find, which was the doorknob of the Squalor penthouse. Violet checked her siblings' handiwork and finally gave the whole rope a satisfied tug.

"I think this should hold us," she said. "I only hope it's long enough."

"Why don't we drop the rope down the shaft," Klaus said, "and listen to see if it hits the bottom? Then we'll know for sure."

"Good idea," Violet replied, and walked to the edge of the passageway. She threw down the edge of the furthermost extension cord, and the children watched as it disappeared into the blackness, dragging the rest of the Baudelaires' line with it. The coils of cord and pull and necktie unwound quickly, like a long snake waking up and slithering down into the shaft. It slithered and slithered and slithered, and the children leaned forward as far as they dared and listened as hard as they could. Finally, they heard a faint, faint *clink*!, as if the extension cord had hit a piece of metal, and the three orphans looked at one another. The thought of climbing down all that distance in the dark, on an ersatz rope they had fashioned themselves, made them want to turn around and run all the way back to their beds and pull the blankets over their heads. The siblings stood together at the edge of this dark and terrible place and wondered if they really dared to begin the climb. The Baudelaire rope had made it to the bottom. But would the Baudelaire children?

"Are you ready?" Klaus asked finally.

"No," Sunny answered.

"Me neither," Violet said, "but if we wait until we're ready we'll be waiting for the rest of our lives. Let's go."

Violet tugged one last time on the rope, and carefully, carefully lowered herself down the passageway. Klaus and Sunny watched her disappear into the darkness as if some huge, hungry creature had eaten her up. "Come on," they heard her whisper, from the blackness. "It's O.K."

Klaus blew on his hands, and Sunny blew on hers, and the two younger Baudelaires followed their sister into the utter darkness of the elevator shaft, only to discover that Violet had not told the truth. It was not O.K. It was not half O.K. It was not even one twenty-seventh O.K. The climb down the shadowy passageway felt like falling into a deep hole at the bottom of a deep pit on the bottom floor of a dungeon that was deep underground, and it was the least O.K. situation the Baudelaires had ever encountered. Their hands gripping the line was the only thing they saw, because even as their eyes adjusted to the darkness, they were afraid to look anywhere else, particularly down. The distant *clink*! at the bottom of the line was the only sound they heard, because the Baudelaires were too scared to speak. And the only thing they felt was sheer terror, as deep and as dark as the passageway itself, a terror so profound that I have slept with four night-lights ever since I visited 667 Dark Avenue and saw this deep pit that the Baudelaires climbed down. But I also saw, during my visit, what the Baudelaire orphans saw when they reached the bottom after climbing for more than three terrifying hours. By then, their eyes had adjusted to the darkness, and they could see what the bottom of their line was hitting, when it was making that faint clinking sound. The edge of the farthest extension cord was bumping up against a piece of metal, all right—a metal lock. The lock was secured around a metal door, and the metal door was attached to a series of metal bars that made up a rusty metal cage. By the time my research led me to this passageway, the cage was empty, and had been empty for a very long time. But it was not empty when the Baudelaires reached it. As they arrived at the bottom of this deep and terrifying place, the Baudelaire orphans looked into the cage and saw the huddled and trembling figures of Duncan and Isadora Quagmire.

CHAPTER
Eight

"*I'm* dreaming," Duncan Quagmire said. His voice was a hoarse whisper of utter shock. "I must be dreaming."

"But how can you be dreaming," Isadora asked him, "if I'm having the same dream?"

"I once read about a journalist," Duncan whispered, "who was reporting on a war and was imprisoned by the enemy for three years. Each morning, she looked out her cell window and thought she saw her grandparents coming to rescue her. But they weren't really there. It was a hallucination."

"I remember reading about a poet," Isadora said, "who would see six lovely maidens in his kitchen on Tuesday nights, but his kitchen was really empty. It was a phantasm."

"No," Violet said, and reached her hand between the bars of the cage. The Quagmire triplets shrank back into the cage's far corner, as if Violet were a poisonous spider instead of a long-lost friend. "It's not a hallucination. It's me, Violet Baudelaire."

“And it’s really Klaus,” Klaus said. “I’m not a phantasm.”

“Sunny!” Sunny said.

The Baudelaire orphans blinked in the darkness, straining their eyes to see as much as possible. Now that they were no longer dangling from the end of a rope, they were able to get a good look at their gloomy surroundings. Their long climb ended in a tiny, filthy room with nothing in it but the rusty cage that the extension cord had clinked against, but the Baudelaires saw that the passageway continued with a long hallway, just as shadowy as the elevator shaft, that twisted and turned away into the dark. The children also got a good look at the Quagmires, and that view was no less gloomy. They were dressed in tattered rags, and their faces were so smeared with dirt that the Baudelaires might not have recognized them, if the two triplets had not been holding the notebooks they took with them wherever they went. But it was not just the dirt on their faces, or the clothes on their bodies, that made the Quagmires look so different. It was the look in their eyes. The Quagmire triplets looked exhausted, and they looked hungry, and they looked very, very frightened. But most of all, Isadora and Duncan looked haunted. The word “haunted,” I’m sure you know, usually applies to a house, graveyard, or supermarket that has ghosts living in it, but the word can also be used to describe people who have seen and heard such horrible things that they feel as if ghosts are living inside them, haunting their brains and hearts with misery and despair. The Quagmires looked this way, and it broke the Baudelaire hearts to see their friends look so desperately sad.

“Is it really you?” Duncan said, squinting at the Baudelaires from the far end of the cage. “Can it really, really be you?”

“Oh, yes,” Violet said, and found that her eyes were filling with tears.

“It’s really the Baudelaires,” Isadora said, stretching her hand out to meet Violet’s. “We’re not dreaming, Duncan. They’re really here.”

Klaus and Sunny reached into the cage as well, and Duncan left his corner to reach the Baudelaires as best he could from behind bars. The five children embraced as much as they could, half laughing and half crying because they were all together once more.

“How in the world did you know where we are?” Isadora said. “*We* don’t even know where we are.”

“You’re in a secret passageway inside 667 Dark Avenue,” Klaus said, “but we didn’t know you’d be here. We were just trying to find out what Gunther—that’s what Olaf is calling himself now—was up to, and our search led us all the way down here.”

“I know what he’s calling himself,” Duncan said, “and I know what he’s up to.” He shuddered, and opened his notebook, which the Baudelaires remembered was dark green but looked black in the gloom. “Every second we spend with him, all he does is brag about his horrible plans, and when he’s not looking, I write down everything he tells us so I don’t forget it. Even though I’m a kidnap victim, I’m still a journalist.”

“And I’m still a poet,” Isadora said, and opened her notebook, which the Baudelaires remembered was black, but now looked even blacker. “Listen to this:

> “*On Auction Day, when the sun goes down, Gunther will sneak us out of town*.”

“How will he do that?” Violet asked. “The police have been informed of your kidnapping, and are on the lookout.”

“I know,” Duncan said. “Gunther wants to smuggle us out of the city, and hide us away on some island where the police won’t find us. He’ll keep us on the island until we come of age and he can steal the Quagmire sapphires. Once he has our fortune, he says, he’ll take us and—”

“Don’t say it,” Isadora cried, covering her ears. “He’s told us so many horrible things. I can’t stand to hear them again.”

“Don’t worry, Isadora,” Klaus said. “We’ll alert the authorities, and they’ll arrest him before he can do anything.”

“But it’s almost too late,” Duncan said. “The In Auction is tomorrow morning. He’s going to hide us inside one of the items and have one of his associates place the highest bid.”

“Which item?” Violet asked.

Duncan flipped the pages of his notebook, and his eyes widened as he reread some of the wretched things Gunther had said. “I don’t know,” he said. “He’s told us so many haunting secrets, Violet. So many awful schemes—all the treachery he has done in the past, and all he’s planning to do in the future. It’s all here in this notebook—from V.F.D. all the way to this terrible auction plan.”

“We’ll have plenty of time to discuss everything,” Klaus said, “but in the meantime, let’s get you out of this cage before Gunther comes back. Violet, do you think you can pick this lock?”

Violet took the lock in her hands and squinted at it in the gloom. “It’s pretty complicated,” she said. “He must have bought himself some extra-difficult locks, after I broke into that suitcase of his when we were living with Uncle Monty. If I had some tools, maybe I could invent something, but there’s absolutely nothing down here.”

“Aguen?” Sunny asked, which meant something like “Could you saw through the bars of the cage?”

“Not saw,” Violet said, so quietly that it was as if she was talking to herself. “I don’t have the time to manufacture a saw. But maybe…” Her voice trailed off, but the other children could see, in the gloom, that she was tying her hair up in a ribbon, to keep it out of her eyes.

“Look, Duncan,” Isadora said, “she’s thinking up an invention! We’ll be out of here in no time!”

“Every night since we’ve been kidnapped,” Duncan said, “we’ve been dreaming of the day when we would see Violet Baudelaire inventing something that could rescue us.”

“If we’re going to rescue you in time,” Violet said, thinking furiously, “then my siblings and I have to climb back up to the penthouse right away.”

Isadora looked nervously around the tiny, dark room. “You’re going to leave us alone?” she asked.

“If I’m going to invent something to get you out of that cage,” Violet replied, “I need all the help I can get, so Klaus and Sunny have to come with me. Sunny, start climbing. Klaus and I will be right behind you.”

“Onosew,” Sunny said, which meant “Yes ma’am,” and Klaus lifted her up to the end of the rope so she could begin the long, dark climb back up to the Squalors’ apartment. Klaus began climbing right behind her, and Violet clasped hands with her friends.

“We’ll be back as soon as we can,” she promised. “Don’t worry, Quagmires. You’ll be out of danger before you know it.”

“In case anything goes wrong,” Duncan said, flipping to a page in his notebook, “like it did the last time, let me tell you—”

Violet placed her finger on Duncan’s mouth. “Shush,” she said. “Nothing will go wrong this time. I swear it.”

“But if it does,” Duncan said, “you should know about V.F.D. before the auction begins.”

“Don’t tell me about it now,” Violet said. “We don’t have time. You can tell us when we’re all safe and sound.” The eldest Baudelaire grabbed the end of the extension cord and started to follow her siblings. “I’ll see you soon,” she called down to the Quagmires, who were already fading into the darkness as she began her climb. “I’ll see you soon,” she said again, just as she lost all sight of them.

The climb back up the secret passageway was much more tiring but a lot less terrifying, simply because they knew what they would find at the other end of their ersatz rope. On the way down the elevator shaft, the Baudelaires had no idea what would be waiting for them at the bottom of such a dark and cavernous journey, but Violet, Klaus, and Sunny knew that all seventy-one bedrooms of the Squalor penthouse would be at the top. And it was these bedrooms—along with the living rooms, dining rooms, breakfast rooms, snack rooms, sitting rooms, standing rooms, ballrooms, bathrooms, kitchens, and the assortment of rooms that seemed to have no purpose at all—that would be helpful in rescuing the Quagmires.

"Listen to me," Violet said to her siblings, after they had been climbing for a few minutes. "When we get up to the top, I want the two of you to search the penthouse."

"What?" Klaus said, peering down at his sister. "We already searched it yesterday, remember?"

"I don't want you to search it for Gunther," Violet replied. "I want you to search it for long, slender objects made of iron."

"Agoula?" Sunny asked, which meant "What for?"

"I think the easiest way to get the Quagmires out of that cage will be by welding," Violet said. "Welding is when you use something very hot to melt metal. If we melt through a few of the bars of the cage, we can make a door and get Duncan and Isadora out of there."

"That's a good idea," Klaus agreed. "But I thought that welding required a lot of complicated equipment."

"Usually it does," Violet said. "In a normal welding situation, I'd use a welding torch, which is a device that makes a very small flame to melt the metal. But the Squalors won't have a welding torch—that's a tool, and tools are out. So I'm going to devise another method. When you two find the long, slender objects made of iron, meet me in the kitchen closest to the front door."

“Selrep,” Sunny said, which meant something like “That’s the one with the bright blue oven.”

“Right,” Violet said, “and I’m going to use that bright blue oven to heat those iron objects as hot as they can get. When they are burning, burning hot, we will take them back down to the cage and use their heat to melt the bars.”

“Will they stay hot long enough to work, after such a long climb down?” Klaus asked.

“They’d better,” Violet replied grimly. “It’s our only hope.”

To hear the phrase “our only hope” always makes one anxious, because it means that if the only hope doesn’t work, there is nothing left, and that is never pleasant to think about, however true it might be. The three Baudelaires felt anxious about the fact that Violet’s invention was their only hope of rescuing the Quagmires, and they were quiet the rest of the way up the elevator shaft, not wanting to consider what would happen to Duncan and Isadora if this only hope didn’t work. Finally, they began to see the dim light from the open sliding doors, and at last they were once again at the front door of the Squalors’ apartment.

“Remember,” Violet whispered, “long, slender objects made of iron. We can’t use bronze or silver or even gold, because those metals will melt in the oven. I’ll see you in the kitchen.”

The younger Baudelaires nodded solemnly, and followed two different trails of bread crumbs in opposite directions, while Violet walked straight into the kitchen with the bright blue oven and looked around uncertainly. Cooking had never been her forte—a phrase which here means “something she couldn’t do very well, except for making toast, and sometimes she couldn’t even do that without burning it to a crisp”—and she was a bit nervous about using the oven without any adult supervision. But then she thought about all the things she had done recently without adult supervision—sprinkling crumbs on the floor, eating apple butter, climbing down an empty elevator shaft on a ersatz rope made of extension cords, curtain pulls, and neckties tied together with the Devil’s Tongue—and stiffened her resolve. She turned the oven's bright blue temperature dial to the highest temperature—500 degrees Fahrenheit—and then, as the oven slowly heated up, began quietly opening and closing the kitchen drawers, looking for three sturdy oven mitts. Oven mitts, as you probably know, are kitchen accessories that serve as ersatz hands by enabling you to pick up objects that would burn your fingers if you touched them directly. The Baudelaires would have to use oven mitts, Violet realized, once the long, slender objects were hot enough to be used as welding torches. Just as her siblings entered the kitchen, Violet found three oven mitts emblazoned with the fancy, curly writing of the In Boutique stuffed into the bottom of the ninth drawer she had opened.

"We hit the jackpot," Klaus whispered, and Sunny nodded in agreement. The two younger Baudelaires were using an expression which here means "Look at these fire tongs—they're perfect!" and they were absolutely right. "Fireplaces must have been in at some point," Klaus explained, holding up three long, slender pieces of iron, "because Sunny remembered that living room with six fireplaces between the ballroom with the green walls and the bathroom with that funny-looking sink. Next to the fireplaces are fire tongs—you know, these long pieces of iron that people use to move logs around to keep a fire going. I figured that if they can touch burning logs, they'll be able to survive a hot oven."

"You really did hit the jackpot," Violet said. "Fire tongs are perfect. Now, when I open the door of the oven, you put them in, Klaus. Sunny, stand back. Babies shouldn't be near a hot oven."

"Prawottle," Sunny said. She meant something like "Older children aren't supposed to be near a hot oven either, especially without adult supervision," but she understood that it was an emergency and crawled to the opposite end of the kitchen, where she could safely watch her older siblings put the long, slender tongs into the hot oven. Like most ovens, the Squalors' bright blue oven was designed for baking cakes and casseroles, not fire tongs, and it was impossible to shut the door of the oven with the long pieces of iron inside. So, as the Baudelaire orphans waited for the pieces of iron to heat up into welding torches, the kitchen heated up as well, as some of the hot air from the oven escaped out the open door. By the time

Klaus asked if the welding torches were ready, the kitchen felt as if it were an oven instead of merely containing one.

“Not yet,” Violet replied, peering carefully into the open oven door. “The tips of the tongs are just beginning to get yellow with heat. We need them to get white with heat, so it will still be a few minutes.”

“I’m nervous,” Klaus said, and then corrected himself. “I mean I’m *anxious*. I don’t like leaving the Quagmires down there all alone.”

“I’m anxious, too,” Violet said, “but the only thing we can do now is wait. If we take the iron out of the oven now, it won’t be of any use to us by the time we get all the way down to the cage.”

Klaus and Sunny sighed, but they nodded in agreement with their sister and settled down to wait for the welding torches to be ready, and as they waited, they felt as if this particular kitchen in the Squalor penthouse was being remodeled before their very eyes. When the Baudelaires had searched the apartment to see if Gunther was hiding in it, they had left crumbs in an assortment of bedrooms, living rooms, dining rooms, breakfast rooms, snack rooms, sitting rooms, standing rooms, bathrooms, ballrooms, and kitchens, as well as those rooms that seemed to have no purpose at all, but the one type of room that the Squalor penthouse lacked was a waiting room. Waiting rooms, as I’m sure you know, are small rooms with plenty of chairs for waiting, as well as piles of old, dull magazines to read and some vapid paintings—the word “vapid” here means “usually containing horses in a field or puppies in a basket”—while you endure the boredom that doctors and dentists inflict on their patients before bringing them in to poke them and prod them and do all the miserable things that such people are paid to do. It is very rare to have a waiting room in someone’s home, because even a home as enormous as the Squalors’ does not contain a doctor’s or dentist’s office, and also because waiting rooms are so uninteresting that you would never want one in the place where you live. The Baudelaires had certainly never wished that the Squalors had a waiting room in their penthouse, but as they sat and waited for Violet’s invention to be ready to use, they felt as if waiting rooms were suddenly in and Esmé had ordered one constructed right there in the kitchen. The kitchen cabinets were not painted with horses in a field or puppies in a basket, and there were no old, dull magazine articles printed on the bright blue stove, but as the three children waited for the iron objects to turn yellow and then orange and then red as they grew hotter and hotter and hotter, they felt the same itchy nervousness as they did when waiting for a trained medical professional.

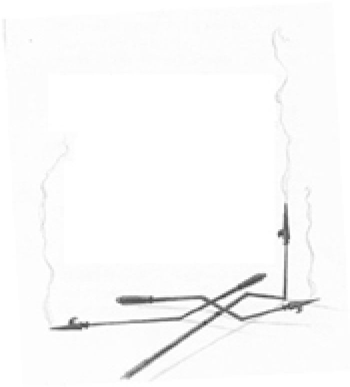
But at last the fire tongs were white-hot, and were ready for their welding appointment with the thick iron bars of the cage. Violet passed out an oven mitt to each of her siblings and then put the third one on her own hand to carefully remove each tong from the oven. “Hold them very, very carefully,” she said, giving an ersatz welding torch to each of her siblings. “They’re hot enough to melt metal, so just imagine what they could do if they touched us. But I’m sure we can manage.”

“It’ll be tougher to go down this time,” Klaus said, as he followed his sisters to the front door of the penthouse. He held his fire tong straight up, as if it were a regular torch instead of a welding one, and he kept his eye on the white-hot part so that it wouldn’t brush up against anything or anybody. “We’ll each have to keep one hand free to hold the torch. But I’m sure we can manage.”

“Zelestin,” Sunny said, when the children reached the sliding doors of the ersatz elevator. She meant something along the lines of “It’ll be terrifying to climb down that horrible passageway again,” but after she said “Zelestin” she added the word “Enipy,” which meant “But I’m sure we can manage,” and the youngest Baudelaire was as sure as her siblings. The three children stood at the edge of the dark passageway, but they did not pause to gather their courage, as they had done before their first descent into the gaping shaft. Their welding torches were hot, as Violet had said, and going down would be tough, as Klaus had said, and the climb would be terrifying, as Sunny had said, but the siblings looked at one another and knew they could manage. The Quagmire triplets were counting on them, and the Baudelaire orphans were sure that this only hope would work after all.

CHAPTER
Nine

One of the greatest myths in the world—and the phrase “greatest myths” is just a fancy way of saying “big fat lies”—is that troublesome things get less and less troublesome if you do them more and more. People say this myth when they are teaching children to ride bicycles, for instance, as though falling off a bicycle and skinning your knee is less troublesome the fourteenth time you do it than it is the first time. The truth is that troublesome things tend to remain troublesome no matter how many times you do them, and that you should avoid doing them unless they are absolutely urgent.



Obviously, it was absolutely urgent for the Baudelaire orphans to take another three-hour climb down into the terrible darkness of the elevator shaft. The children knew that the Quagmire triplets were in grave danger, and that using Violet’s invention to melt the bars of the cage was the only way that their friends could escape before Gunther hid them inside one of the items of the In Auction, and smuggled them out of the city. But I’m sorry to say that the absolute urgency of the Baudelaires’ second climb did not make it any less troublesome. The passageway was still as dark as a bar of extra-dark chocolate sitting in a planetarium covered in a thick, black blanket, even with the tiny glow from the white-hot tips of the fire tongs, and the sensation of lowering themselves down the elevator shaft still felt like a descent into the hungry mouth of some terrible creature. With only the *clink*! of the last extension cord hitting the lock of the cage to guide them, the three siblings pulled themselves down the ersatz rope with one hand, and held out their welding torches with the other, and the trek down to the tiny, filthy room where the triplets were trapped was still not even one twenty-seventh O.K.

But the dreadful repetition of the Baudelaires' troublesome climb was dwarfed in comparison with the sinister surprise they found at the bottom, a surprise so terrible that the three children simply refused to believe it. Violet reached the end of the final extension cord and thought it was a hallucination. Klaus stood looking at the cage and thought that it must be a phantasm. And Sunny peered in through the bars and prayed that it was some combination of the two. The youngsters stared at the tiny, filthy room, and stared at the cage, but it took them several minutes before they believed that the Quagmires were no longer inside.

"They're gone," Violet said. "They're gone, and it's all my fault!" She threw her welding torch into the corner of the tiny room, where it sizzled against the floor. She turned to her siblings, and they could see, by the white glow of their tongs, that their older sister was beginning to cry. "My invention was supposed to save them," she said mournfully, "and now Gunther has snatched them away. I'm a terrible inventor, and a horrible friend."

Klaus threw his welding torch into the corner, and gave his sister a hug. "You're the best inventor I know," he said, "and your invention was a good one. Listen to those welding torches sizzle. The time just wasn't ripe for your invention, that's all."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Violet said miserably.

Sunny threw the last welding torch into the corner, and took off her oven mitt so she could pat her sister comfortingly on the ankle. "Noque, noque," she said, which meant "There, there."

“All it means,” Klaus said, “is that you invented something that wasn’t handy at this particular time. It’s not your fault that we didn’t rescue them—it’s Gunther’s.”

“I guess I know that,” Violet said, wiping her eyes. “I’m just sad that the time wasn’t ripe for my invention. Who knows if we will ever see our friends again?”

“We will,” Klaus said. “Just because the time isn’t right for your inventing skills, doesn’t mean it isn’t ripe for my researching skills.”

“Dwestall,” Sunny said sadly, which meant “All the research in the world can’t help Duncan and Isadora now.”

“That’s where you’re wrong, Sunny,” Klaus replied. “Gunther might have snatched them, but we know where he’s taking them—to Veblen Hall. He’s going to hide them inside one of the items at the In Auction, remember?”

“Yes,” Violet said, “but which one?”

“If we climb back up to the penthouse,” Klaus said, “and go to the Squalor library, I think I can figure it out.”

“Meotze,” Sunny said, which meant “But the Squalor library has only those snooty books on what’s in and what’s out.”

“You’re forgetting the recent addition to the library,” Klaus said. “Esmé told us that Gunther had left a copy of the In Auction catalog, remember? Wherever he’s planning to hide the Quagmires, it’ll be listed in the catalog. If we can figure out which item he’s hiding them in—”

“We can get them out of there,” Violet finished, “before he auctions them off. That’s a brilliant idea, Klaus!”

“It’s no less brilliant than inventing welding torches,” Klaus said. “I just hope the time is ripe this time.”

“Me too,” Violet said. “After all, it’s our only—”

“Vinung,” Sunny said, which meant “Don’t say it,” and her sister nodded in agreement. There was no use in saying it was their only hope, and getting them as anxious as they were before, so without another word the Baudelaires hoisted themselves back up on their makeshift rope and began climbing back up to the Squalor penthouse. The darkness closed in on them again, and the children began to feel as if their whole lives had been spent in this deep and shadowy pit, instead of in a variety of locations ranging from a lumbermill in Paltryville to a cave on the shores of Lake Lachrymose to the Baudelaire mansion, which sat in charred remains just a few blocks away from Dark Avenue. But rather than think about all of the shadowy places in the Baudelaire past, or the shadowiest place that they were climbing through now, the three siblings tried to concentrate on the brighter places in the Baudelaire future. They thought of the penthouse apartment, which drew closer and closer to them as they climbed. They thought of the Squalor library, which could contain the proper information they needed to defeat Gunther’s plan. And they thought of some glorious time that was yet to come, when the Baudelaires and the Quagmires could enjoy their friendship without the ghastly shadow of evil and greed that hung over them now. The Baudelaire orphans tried to keep their minds on these bright thoughts of the future as they climbed up the shadowy elevator shaft, and by the time they reached the sliding doors they felt that perhaps this glorious time was not so far off.

“It must almost be morning,” Violet said, as she helped Sunny hoist herself out of the elevator doors. “We’d better untie our rope from the doorknob, and shut these doors, otherwise the Squalors will see what we’ve been up to.”

“Why shouldn’t they see?” Klaus asked. “Maybe then they’d believe us about Gunther.”

“No one ever believes us about Gunther, or any of Olaf’s other disguises,” Violet said, “unless we have some evidence. All we have now is an ersatz elevator, an empty cage, and three cooling fire tongs. That’s not evidence of anything.”

“I suppose you’re right,” Klaus said. “Well, why don’t you two untie the rope, and I’ll go straight to the library and start reading the catalog.”

“Good plan,” Violet said.

“Reauhop!” Sunny said, which meant “And good luck!” Klaus quietly opened the door of the penthouse and let himself in, and the Baudelaire sisters began pulling the rope back up the shaft. The end of the last extension cord *clinked* and *clinked* against the walls of the passageway as Sunny wound up the ersatz rope until it was a coil of extension cords, curtain pulls, and fancy neckties. Violet untied the last double knot to detach it from the doorknob, and turned to her sister.

“Let’s store this under my bed,” she said, “in case we need it later. It’s on the way to the library anyway.”

“Yallrel,” Sunny added, which meant “And let’s shut the sliding elevator doors, so the Squalors don’t see that we’ve been sneaking around an elevator shaft.”

“Good thinking,” Violet said, and pressed the Up button. The doors slid shut again, and after taking a good look around to make sure they hadn’t left anything behind, the two Baudelaires walked into the penthouse and followed their bread-crumb trail past a breakfast room, down a hallway, across a standing room, down a hallway, and finally to Violet’s room, where they stored the ersatz rope under the bed. They were about to head right to the library when Sunny noticed a note that had been left on Violet’s extra-fluffy pillow.

“‘Dear Violet,’” read Violet, “‘I couldn’t find you or your siblings this morning to say good-bye. I had to leave early to buy yellow paper clips before heading over to the In Auction. Esmé will take you to Veblen Hall at ten-thirty sharp, so be sure to be ready, or she’ll be very annoyed. See you then! Sincerely yours, Jerome Squalor.’”

“Yikes!” Sunny said, pointing to the nearest of the 612 clocks that the Squalors owned.

“Yikes is right,” Violet said. “It’s already ten o’clock. All that climbing up and down the elevator shaft took much longer than I thought.”

“Wrech,” Sunny added, which meant something like “Not to mention making those welding torches.”

“We’d better go to the library right away,” Violet said. “Maybe we can help Klaus speed up the research process in some way.”

Sunny nodded in agreement, and the two sisters walked down the hallway to the Squalor library. Since Jerome had first shown it to them, Violet and Sunny had scarcely been inside, and it looked like nobody else had used it much, either. A good library will never be too neat, or too dusty, because somebody will always be in it, taking books off the shelves and staying up late reading them. Even libraries that were not to the Baudelaires’ taste—Aunt Josephine’s library, for instance, only contained books on grammar—were comfortable places to be in, because the owners of the library used them so much. But the Squalor library was as neat and as dusty as could be. All of the dull books on what was in and what was out sat on the shelves in tidy rows, with layers of dust on top of them as if they hadn’t been disturbed since they’d first been placed there. It made the Baudelaire sisters a little sad to see all those books sitting in the library unread and unnoticed, like stray dogs or lost children that nobody wanted to take home. The only sign of life in the library was their brother, who was reading the catalog so closely that he didn’t look up until his sisters were standing at his side.

“I hate to disturb you when you’re researching,” Violet said, “but there was a note from Jerome on my pillow. Esmé is going to take us to Veblen Hall at ten-thirty sharp, and it’s just past ten o’clock now. Is there any way we can help you?”

“I don’t see how,” Klaus said, his eyes looking worried behind his glasses. “There’s only one copy of the catalog, and it’s pretty complicated. Each of the items for the auction is called a lot, and the catalog lists each lot with a description and a guess at what the highest bid may be. I’ve read up to Lot #49, which is a valuable postage stamp.”

“Well, Gunther can’t hide the Quagmires in a postage stamp,” Violet said. “You can skip that lot.”

"I've been skipping lots of lots," Klaus said, "but I'm still no closer to figuring out where the triplets will be. Would Gunther hide them in Lot #14—an enormous globe? Would he hide them under the lid of Lot #25—a rare and valuable piano? Would he hide them in Lot #48—an enormous statue of a scarlet fish?" Klaus stopped and turned the page of a catalog. "Or would he hide them in Lot #50, which is—"

Klaus ended his sentence in a gasp, but his sisters knew immediately that he did not mean that the fiftieth item to be sold at the In Auction was a sharp intake of breath. He meant he'd discovered something remarkable in the catalog, and they leaned forward to read over his shoulder and see what it was.

"I can't believe it," Violet said. "I simply can't believe it."

"Toomsk," Sunny said, which meant something like "This must be where the Quagmires will be hidden."

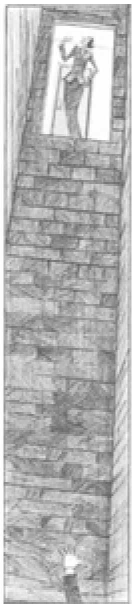
"I agree with Sunny," Klaus said, "even though there's no description of the item. They don't even write what the letters stand for."

"We'll find out what they stand for," Violet said, "because we're going to find Esmé right this minute, and tell her what's going on. When she finds out, she'll finally believe us about Gunther, and we'll get the Quagmires out of Lot #50 before they leave the city. You were right, Klaus—the time was ripe for your researching skills."

"I guess I was right," Klaus said. "I can scarcely believe our luck."

The Baudelaires looked again at the page of the catalog, making sure that it was neither a hallucination nor a phantasm. And it wasn't. Right there, written in neat black type under the heading "Lot #50," were three letters, and three punctuation marks, that seemed to spell out the solution to the Baudelaires' problems. The children looked at one another and smiled. All three siblings could scarcely believe their luck. The Baudelaire orphans could scarcely believe that those three letters spelled out the hiding place of the Quagmires as clearly as it spelled out "V.F.D."

CHAPTER
Ten



"…*and* one of the items in the catalog is listed as 'V.F.D.,' which is the secret that the Quagmires tried to tell us about right before they were kidnapped," Klaus finished.

"This is terrible," Esmé said, and took a sip of the parsley soda she had insisted on pouring for herself before the Baudelaire orphans could tell her everything they had discovered. Then she had insisted on settling herself on the innest couch in her favorite sitting room, and that the three children sit in three chairs grouped around her in a semicircle, before they could relate the story of Gunther's true identity, the secret passageway behind the sliding elevator doors, the scheme to smuggle the Quagmires out of the city, and the surprising appearance of those three mysterious initials as the description of Lot #50. The three siblings were pleased that their guardian had not dismissed their findings, or argued with them about Gunther or the Quagmires or anything else, but instead had quietly and calmly listened to every detail. In fact, Esmé was so quiet and calm that it was disconcerting, a word which here means "a warning that the Baudelaire children did not heed in time."

"This is the least smashing thing I have ever heard," Esmé said, taking another sip of her in beverage. "Let me see if I have understood everything you have said. Gunther *is* in fact Count Olaf in disguise."

"Yes," Violet said. "His boots are covering up his tattoo, and his monocle makes him scrunch his face up to hide his one eyebrow."

"And he has hidden away the Quagmires in a cage at the bottom of my elevator shaft," Esmé said, putting her soda glass down on a nearby table.

"Yes," Klaus said. "There's no elevator behind those doors. Somehow Gunther removed it so he could use the shaft as a secret passageway."

"And now he's taken the Quagmires out of the cage," Esmé continued, "and is going to smuggle them out of the city by hiding them inside Lot #50 of the In Auction."

"Kaxret," Sunny said, which meant "You got it, Esmé."

"This is certainly a complicated plot," Esmé said. "I'm surprised that young children such as yourself were able to figure it out, but I'm glad you did." She paused for a moment and removed a speck of dust from one of her fingernails. "And now there's only one thing to do. We'll rush right to Veblen Hall and put a stop to this terrible scheme. We'll have Gunther arrested and the Quagmires set free. We'd better leave right this minute."

Esmé stood up, and beckoned to the children with a faint smile. The children followed her out of the sitting room and past twelve kitchens to the front door, exchanging puzzled glances. Their guardian was right, of course, that they should go to Veblen Hall and expose Gunther and his treachery, but they couldn't help wondering why the city's sixth most important financial advisor was so calm when she said it. The children were so anxious about the Quagmires that they felt as if they were jumping out of their skin, but Esmé led the Baudelaires out of the penthouse as if they were going to the grocery store to purchase whole wheat flour instead of rushing to an auction to stop a horrible crime. As she shut the door of the apartment and turned to smile at the children again, the three siblings could see no sign of anxiousness on her face, and it was disconcerting.

“Klaus and I will take turns carrying you, Sunny,” Violet said, lifting her sister up. “That way the trip down the stairs will be easier for you.”

“Oh, we don’t have to walk down all those stairs,” Esmé said.

“That’s true,” Klaus said. “Sliding down the banisters will be much quicker.”

Esmé put one arm around the children and began walking them away from the front door. It was nice to receive an affectionate gesture from their guardian, but her arm was wrapped around them so tightly that they could scarcely move, which was also disconcerting. “We won’t have to slide down the banisters, either,” she said.

“Then how will we get down from the penthouse?” Violet asked.

Esmé stretched out her other arm, and used one of her long fingernails to press the Up button next to the sliding doors. This was the most disconcerting thing of all, but by now, I’m sorry to say, it was too late. “We’ll take the elevator,” she said, as the doors slid open, and then with one last smile she swept her arm forward and pushed the Baudelaire orphans into the darkness of the elevator shaft.

[redacted]

[redacted]

Sometimes words are not enough. There are some circumstances so utterly wretched that I cannot describe them in sentences or paragraphs or even a whole series of books, and the terror and woe that the Baudelaire orphans felt after Esmé pushed them into the elevator shaft is one of those most dreadful circumstances that can be represented only with two pages of utter blackness. I have no words for the profound horror the children felt as they tumbled down into the darkness. I can think of no sentence that can convey how loudly they screamed, or how cold the air was as it *whoosh*ed around them while they fell. And there is no paragraph I could possibly type that would enable you to imagine how frightened the Baudelaires were as they plunged toward certain doom.

But I can tell you that they did not die. Not one hair on their heads had been harmed by the time the children finally stopped tumbling through the darkness. They survived the fall from the top of the shaft for the simple reason that they did not reach the bottom. Something broke their fall, a phrase which here means that the Baudelaires' plunge was stopped halfway between the sliding elevator doors and the metal cage where the Quagmires had been locked up. Something broke their fall without even injuring them, and though it at first felt like a miracle, when the children understood that they were alive, and no longer falling, they reached out their hands and soon realized that it felt a lot more like a net. While the Baudelaires were reading the catalog of the In Auction, and telling Esmé what they had learned, someone had stretched a rope net across the entire passageway, and it was this net that had stopped the children from plunging to their doom. Far, far above the orphans was the Squalor penthouse, and far, far below them was the cage in the tiny, filthy room with the hallway leading out of it. The Baudelaire orphans were trapped.

But it is far better to be trapped than to be dead, and the three children hugged each other in relief that something had broken their fall. “Spenset,” Sunny said, in a voice hoarse from screaming.

“Yes, Sunny,” Violet said, holding her close. “We're alive.” She sounded as if she were talking as much to herself as to her sister.

“We're alive,” Klaus said, hugging them both. “We're alive, and we're O.K.”

“I wouldn’t say you were O.K.” Esmé’s voice called down to them from the top of the passageway. Her voice echoed off the walls of the passageway, but the children could still hear every cruel word. “You’re alive, but you’re definitely not O.K. As soon as the auction is over and the Quagmires are on their way out of the city, Gunther will come and get you, and I can guarantee that you three orphans will never be O.K. again. What a wonderful and profitable day! My former acting teacher will finally get his hands on not one but two enormous fortunes!”

“Your former acting teacher?” Violet asked in horror. “You mean you’ve known Gunther’s true identity the entire time?”

“Of course I did,” Esmé said. “I just had to fool you kids and my dim-witted husband into thinking he was really an auctioneer. Luckily, I am a smashing actress, so it was easy to trick you.”

“So you’ve been working together with that terrible villain?” Klaus called up to her. “How could you do that to us?”

“He’s not a terrible villain,” Esmé said. “He’s a genius! I instructed the doorman not to let you out of the penthouse until Gunther came and retrieved you, but Gunther convinced me that throwing you down there was a better idea, and he was right! Now there’s no way you’ll make it to the auction and mess up our plans!”

“Zisalem!” Sunny shrieked.

“My sister is right!” Violet cried. “You’re our guardian! You’re supposed to be keeping us safe, not throwing us down elevator shafts and stealing our fortune!”

“But I want to steal from you,” Esmé said. “I want to steal from you the way Beatrice stole from me.”

“What are you talking about?” Klaus asked. “You’re already unbelievably wealthy. Why do you want even more money?”

“Because it’s in, of course,” Esmé said. “Well, toodle-oo, children. ‘Toodle-oo’ is the in way of saying good-bye to three bratty orphans you’re never going to see again.”

“*Why*?” Violet cried. “Why are you treating us so terribly?”

Esmé’s answer to this question was the cruelest of all, and like a fall down an elevator shaft, there were no words for her reply. She merely laughed, a loud rude cackle that bounced off the walls of the passageway and then faded into silence as their guardian walked away. The Baudelaire orphans looked at one another—or tried to look at one another, in the darkness—and trembled in disgust and fear, shaking the net that had trapped them and saved them at the same time.

“Dielee?” Sunny said miserably, and her siblings knew that she meant “What are we going to do?”

“I don’t know,” Klaus said, “but we’ve got to do something.”

“And we’ve got to do it quickly,” Violet added, “but this is a very difficult situation. There’s no use climbing up or down—the walls feel too smooth.”

“And there’s no use making a lot of noise to try and get someone’s attention,” Klaus said. “Even if anybody hears, they’ll just think someone is yelling in one of the apartments.”

Violet closed her eyes in thought, although it was so dark that it didn’t really make a difference if her eyes were closed or open. “Klaus, maybe the time is right for your researching skills,” she said after a moment. “Can you think of some moment in history when people got out of a trap like this one?”

“I don’t think so,” Klaus replied sadly. “In the myth of Hercules, he’s trapped between two monsters named Scylla and Charybdis, just like we’re trapped between the sliding doors and the floor. But he got out of the trap by turning them into whirlpools.”

“Glaucus,” Sunny said, which meant something like “But we can’t do that.”

“I know,” Klaus said glumly. “Myths are often entertaining, but they’re never very helpful. Maybe the time is ripe for one of Violet’s inventions.”

“But I don’t have any materials to work with,” Violet said, reaching out her hand to feel the edges of the net. “I can’t use this net for an invention, because if I start to tear it up, we’ll fall. The net seems to be attached to the walls with little metal pegs that stick into the walls, but I can’t pull those out and use them, either.”

“Gyzan?” Sunny asked.

“Yes,” Violet replied, “pegs. Feel right here, Sunny. Gunther probably stood on a long ladder to drive these pegs into the walls of the passageway, and then strung the net across the pegs. I guess the walls of the elevator shaft are soft enough that small sharp objects can be stuck into them.”

“Tholc?” Sunny asked, which meant “Like teeth?” and instantly her siblings knew what she was thinking.

“No, Sunny,” Violet said. “You can’t climb up the elevator shaft by using your teeth. It’s too dangerous.”

“Yoigt,” Sunny pointed out, which meant something like “But if I fall, I’ll just fall back into the net.”

“But what if you get stuck halfway up?” Klaus asked. “Or what if you lose a tooth?”

“Vasta,” Sunny said, which meant “I’ll just have to risk it—it’s our only hope,” and her siblings reluctantly agreed. They did not like the idea of their baby sister climbing up to the sliding doors of the ersatz elevator, using only her teeth, but they could think of no other way to escape in time to foil Gunther’s plan. The time wasn’t ripe for Violet’s inventing skills, or for the knowledge Klaus had from his reading, but the time was ripe for Sunny’s sharp teeth, and the youngest Baudelaire tilted her head back and then swung forward, sticking one of her teeth into the wall with a rough sound that would make any dentist weep for hours. But the Baudelaires were not dentists, and the three children listened closely in the darkness to hear if Sunny's tooth would stick as firmly as the net pegs. To their delight they heard nothing—no scraping or sliding or cracking or anything that would indicate that Sunny's teeth wouldn't hold. Sunny even shook her head a little bit to see if that would easily dislodge her tooth from the wall, but it remained a firm toothhold. Sunny swung her head slightly, and embedded another tooth, slightly above the first one. The second tooth stuck, so Sunny carefully eased out the first tooth and inserted it once more in the wall, slightly above the second tooth. By spacing her teeth slightly apart, Sunny had moved a few inches up the wall, and by the time she stuck her first tooth above the second one again, her little body was no longer touching the net.

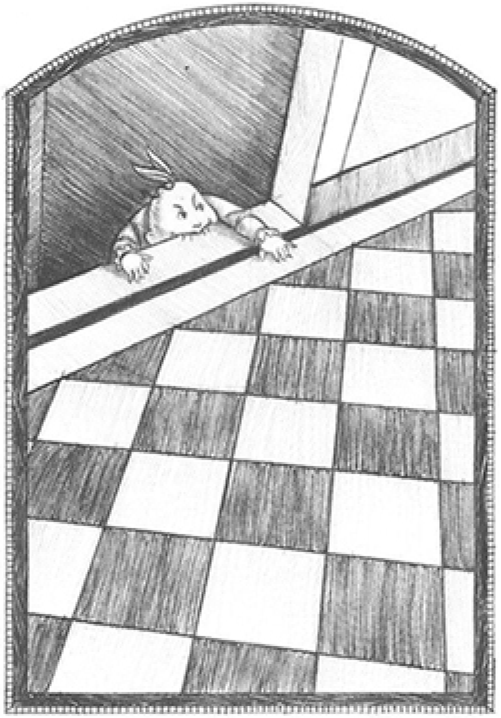
"Good luck, Sunny," Violet said.

"We're rooting for you, Sunny," Klaus said.

Sunny did not reply, but her siblings were not alarmed because they imagined it was difficult to say much when you had a mouthful of wall. So Violet and Klaus merely sat on their net and continued to call up encouragement to their baby sister. Had Sunny been able to climb and speak at the same time, she might have said "Soried," which meant something like "So far so good," or "Yaff," which meant "I think I've reached the halfway point," but the two older Baudelaires heard nothing but the sound of her teeth inserting and detaching themselves in the dark until Sunny triumphantly called down the word "Top!"

"Oh, Sunny!" Klaus cried. "You did it!"

"Way to go!" Violet called up. "Now, go get our makeshift rope from under the bed, and we'll climb up and join you."



"Ganba," Sunny called back, and crawled off. The two older siblings sat and waited in the darkness for a while, marveling at their sister's skills.

"I couldn't have climbed all the way up this passageway," Violet said, "not when I was Sunny's age."

"Me neither," Klaus said, "although we both have regular-sized teeth."

"It's not just the size of her teeth," Violet said, "it's the size of her courage, and the size of her concern for her siblings."

"And the size of the trouble we're in," Klaus added, "and the size of our guardian's treachery. I can't believe Esmé was scheming together with Gunther the entire time. She's as ersatz as her elevator."

"Esmé's a pretty good actress," Violet said comfortingly, "even though she's a terrible person. She had us completely fooled that Gunther had her completely fooled. But what was she talking about when she said—"

“Tada!” Sunny called down from the sliding doors.

“She has the rope,” Violet said excitedly. “Tie it to the doorknob, Sunny, using the Devil’s Tongue.”

“No,” Klaus said, “I have a better idea.”

“A better idea than climbing out of here?” Violet asked.

“I want to climb out of here,” Klaus said, “but I don’t think we should climb *up*. Then we’ll just be at the penthouse.”

“But from the penthouse,” Violet said, “we can get to Veblen Hall. We can even slide down the banisters to save time.”

“But at the end of the banisters,” Klaus said, “is the lobby of the building, and in the lobby is a doorman with strict instructions not to let us leave.”

“I hadn’t thought about him,” Violet said. “He always follows instructions.”

“That’s why we’ve got to leave 667 Dark Avenue another way,” Klaus said.

“Ditemu,” Sunny called down, which meant something like “What other way is there?”

“Down,” Klaus said. “That tiny room at the bottom of the elevator shaft has a hallway leading out of it, remember? It’s right next to the cage.”

“That’s true,” Violet said. “That must be how Gunther snatched the Quagmires away before we could rescue them. But who knows where it leads?”

“Well, if Gunther took the Quagmires down that hallway,” Klaus said, “it must lead to somewhere near Veblen Hall. And that’s precisely where we want to go.”

“You’re right,” Violet said. “Sunny, forget about tying the rope to the doorknob. Someone might see it, anyway, and realize we’ve escaped. Just bring it down here. Do you think you can bite your way back down?”

“Geronimo!” Sunny cried, which meant something like “I don’t need to bite my way back down,” and the youngest Baudelaire was right. She took a deep breath, and threw herself down the dark passageway, the coil of ersatz rope trailing behind her. This time, the plunge does not need to be represented by pages of darkness, because the terror of the long, dark fall was alleviated—the word “alleviated” here means “not particularly on Sunny’s mind”—because the youngest Baudelaire knew that a net, and her siblings, were waiting for her at the bottom. With a *thump*! Sunny landed on the net, and with a slightly smaller *thump*! the coil of rope landed next to her. After making sure her sister was unharmed by the fall, Violet began tying one end of their rope to one of the pegs holding the net in place.

“I’ll make sure this end of the rope is secured,” Violet said. “Sunny, if your teeth aren’t too sore from the climb, use them to cut a hole in the net, so we can climb through it.”

“What can I do?” Klaus asked.

“You can pray this works,” Violet said, but the Baudelaire sisters were so quick with their tasks that there was no time for even the shortest of religious ceremonies. In a matter of moments, Violet had attached the rope to the peg with some complicated and powerful knots, and Sunny had cut a child-sized hole in the middle of the net. Violet dangled the rope down the hole, and the three children listened until they heard the familiar *clink*! of their ersatz rope against the metal cage. The Baudelaire orphans paused for a moment at the hole in the net, and stared down into the blackness.

“I can’t believe we’re climbing down this passageway again,” Violet said.

“I know what you mean,” Klaus said. “If someone had asked me, that day at the beach, if I ever thought we’d be climbing up and down an empty elevator shaft in an attempt to rescue a pair of triplets, I would have said never in a million years. And now we’re doing it for the fifth time in twenty-four hours. What happened to us? What led us to this awful place we're staring at now?"

"Misfortune," Violet said quietly.

"A terrible fire," Klaus said.

"Olaf," Sunny said decisively, and began crawling down the rope. Klaus followed his sister down through the hole in the net, and Violet followed Klaus, and the three Baudelaires made the long trek down the bottom half of the passageway until they reached the tiny, filthy room, the empty cage, and the hallway that they hoped would lead them to the In Auction. Sunny squinted up at their rope, making sure that her siblings had safely reached the bottom. Klaus squinted at the hallway, trying to see how long it was, or if there was anybody or anything lurking in it. And Violet squinted in the corner, at the welding torches the children had thrown in the corner when the time had not been ripe to use them.

"We should take these with us," she said.

"But why?" Klaus asked. "They've certainly cooled off long ago."

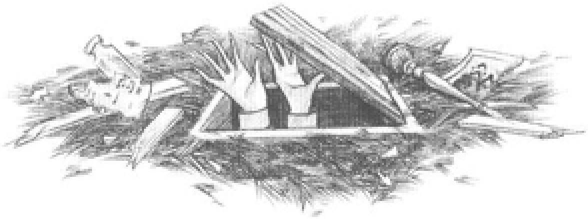
"They have," Violet said, picking one up. "And the tips are all bent from throwing them in the corner. But they still might come in handy for something. We don't know what we'll encounter in that hallway, and I don't want to come up shorthanded. Here, Klaus. Here's yours, and here's Sunny's."

The younger Baudelaires took the bent, cooled fire tongs, and then, sticking close to one another, all three children took their first few steps down the hallway. In the utter darkness of this terrible place, the fire tongs seemed like long, slender extensions of the Baudelaires' hands, instead of inventions they were each holding, but this was not what Violet had meant when she said she didn't want them to be shorthanded. "Shorthanded" is a word which here means "unprepared," and Violet was thinking that three children alone in a dark hallway holding fire tongs were perhaps a bit more prepared than three children alone in a dark hallway holding nothing at all. And I'm sorry to tell you that the eldest Baudelaire was absolutely right.

The three children couldn’t afford to be shorthanded at all, not with the unfair advantage that was lurking at the end of their walk. As they took one cautious step after another, the Baudelaire orphans needed to be as longhanded as possible for the element of surprise that was waiting for them when the dark hallway came to an end.

CHAPTER Eleven

The French expression “cul-de-sac” describes what the Baudelaire orphans found when they reached the end of the dark hallway, and like all French expressions, it is most easily understood when you translate each French word into English. The word “de,” for instance, is a very common French word, so even if I didn’t know a word of French, I would be certain that “de” means “of.” The word “sac” is less common, but I am fairly certain that it means something like “mysterious circumstances.” And the word “cul” is such a rare French word that I am forced to guess at its translation, and my guess is that in this case it would mean “At the end of the dark hallway, the Baudelaire children found an assortment,” so that the expression “cul-de-sac” here means “At the end of the dark hallway, the Baudelaire children found an assortment of mysterious circumstances.”



If the Baudelaires had been able to choose a French expression that would be waiting for them at the end of the hallway, they might have chosen one that meant “By the time the three children rounded the last dark corner of the corridor, the police had captured Gunther and rescued the Quagmire triplets,” or at least “The Baudelaires were delighted to see that the hallway led straight to Veblen Hall, where the In Auction was taking place.” But the end of the hallway proved to be as mysterious and worrisome as the rest of it. The entire length of the hallway was very dark, and it had so many twists and turns that the three children frequently found themselves bumping into the walls. The ceiling of the hallway was very low—Gunther must have had to crouch when he used it for his treacherous plans—and over their heads the three children could hear a variety of noises that told them where the hallway was probably taking them. After the first few curves, they heard the muted voice of the doorman, and his footsteps as he walked overhead, and the Baudelaires realized that they must be underneath the lobby of the Squalors' apartment building. After a few more curves, they heard two men discussing ocean decorations, and they realized they must be walking beneath Dark Avenue. And after a few more curves, they heard the rickety rattle of an old trolley that was passing over their heads, and the children knew that the hallway was leading them underneath one of the city's trolley stations. On and on the hallway curved, and the Baudelaires heard a variety of city sounds—the clopping of horses' hooves, the grinding of factory equipment, the tolling of church bells and the clatter of people dropping things—but when they finally reached the corridor's end, there was no sound over their heads at all. The Baudelaires stood still and tried to imagine a place in the city where it was absolutely silent.

"Where do you think we are?" Violet asked, straining her ears to listen even more closely. "It's as silent as a tomb up there."

"That's not what I'm worried about," Klaus answered, poking the wall with his fire tong. "I can't find which way the hallway curves. I think we might be at a dead end."

"A dead end!" Violet said, and poked the opposite wall with her tong. "It can't be a dead end. Nobody builds a hallway that goes nowhere."

"Pratjic," Sunny said, which meant "Gunther must have ended up somewhere if he took this passageway."

"I'm poking every inch of these walls," Klaus said grimly, "and there's no door or stairway or curve or anything. It's a dead end, all right. There's no other word for it. Actually, there's a French expression for 'dead end,' but I can't remember what is."

"I guess we have to retrace our steps," Violet said miserably. "I guess we have to turn around, and make our way back down the corridor, and climb up to the net, and have Sunny teeth her way to the penthouse and find some more materials to make an ersatz rope, and climb all the way up to the top floor, and slide down the banisters to the lobby, and sneak past the doorman and run to Veblen Hall."

"Pyetian," Sunny said, which meant something like "We'll never make it there in time to expose Gunther and save the Quagmires."

"I know," Violet sighed. "But I don't know what else we can do. It looks like we're shorthanded, even with these tongs."

"If we had some shovels," Klaus said, "we could try to dig our way out of the hallway, but we can't use the tongs as shovels."

"Tenti," Sunny said, which meant "If we had some dynamite, we could blast our way out of the hallway, but we can't use the tongs as dynamite."

"But we might be able to use them as noisemakers," Violet said suddenly. "Let's bang on the ceiling with our tongs, and see if we can attract the attention of someone who is passing by."

"It doesn't sound like anyone is passing by," Klaus said, "but it's worth a try. Here, Sunny, I'll pick you up so your tong can reach the ceiling, too."

Klaus picked his sister up, and the three children began to bang on the ceiling, planning to make a racket that would last for several minutes. But as soon as the their tongs first hit the ceiling, the Baudelaires were showered with black dust. It rained down on them like a dry, filthy storm, and the children had to cut short their banging to cough and rub their eyes and spit out the dust that had fallen into their mouths.

"Ugh!" Violet spat. "This tastes terrible."

"It tastes like burned toast," Klaus said.

"Peflob!" Sunny shrieked.

At that, Violet stopped coughing, and licked the tip of her finger in thought. "It's ashes," she said. "Maybe we're below a fireplace."

"I don't think so," Klaus said. "Look up."

The Baudelaires looked up, and saw that the black dust had uncovered a very small stripe of light, barely as wide as a pencil. The children gazed up into it, and could see the morning sun gazing right back at them.

"Tisdu?" Sunny said, which meant "Where in the city can you find ashes outdoors?"

"Maybe we're below a barbeque pit," Klaus said.

"Well, we'll find out soon enough," Violet replied, and began to sweep more dust away from the ceiling. As it fell on the children in a thick, dark cloud, the skinny stripe of light became four skinny stripes, like a drawing of a square on the ceiling. By the light of the square, the Baudelaires could see a pair of hinges. "Look," Violet said, "it's a trapdoor. We couldn't see it in the darkness of the hallway, but there it is."

Klaus pressed his tong against the trapdoor to try to open it, but it didn't budge. "It's locked, of course," he said. "I bet Gunther locked it behind him when he took the Quagmires away."

Violet looked up at the trapdoor, and the other children could see, by the light of the sun streaming in, that she was tying her hair up in a ribbon to keep it out of her eyes. "A lock isn't going to stop us," she said. "Not when we've come all this way. I think the time is finally ripe for these tongs—not as welding torches, and not as noisemakers." She smiled, and turned her attention to her siblings. "We can use them as crowbars," she said excitedly.

"Herdiset?" Sunny asked.

"A crowbar is a sort of portable lever," Violet said, "and these tongs will work perfectly. We'll stick the bent end into the part where the light is shining through, and then push the rest of the tong sharply down. It should bring the trapdoor down with it. Understand?"

"I think so," Klaus said. "Let's try."

The Baudelaires tried. Carefully, they stuck the part of the tongs that had been heated in the oven into one side of the square of light. And then, grunting with the effort, they pushed the straight end of the tongs down as sharply as they could, and I'm happy to report that the crowbars worked perfectly. With a tremendous crackling sound and another cloud of ashes, the trapdoor bent on its hinges and opened toward the children, who had to duck as it swung over their heads. Sunlight streamed into the hallway, and the Baudelaires saw that they had finally come to the end of their long, dark journey.

“It worked!” Violet cried. “It really worked!”

“The time was ripe for your inventing skills!” Klaus cried. “The solution was right on the tip of our tongs!”

“Up!” Sunny shrieked, and the children agreed. By standing on tiptoe, the Baudelaires could grab ahold of the hinges and pull themselves out of the hallway, leaving behind their crowbars, and in a moment the three children were squinting in the sunlight.

One of my most prized possessions is a small wooden box with a special lock on it that is more than five hundred years old and works according to a secret code that my grandfather taught me. My grandfather learned it from his grandfather, and his grandfather learned it from his grandfather, and I would teach it to my grandchild if I thought that I would ever have a family of my own instead of living out the remainder of my days all alone in this world. The small wooden box is one of my most prized possessions, because when the lock is opened according to the code, a small silver key may be found inside, and this key fits the lock on one of my other most prized possessions, which is a slightly larger wooden box given to me by a woman whom my grandfather always refused to speak about. Inside this slightly larger wooden box is a roll of parchment, a word which here means “some very old paper printed with a map of the city at the time when the Baudelaire orphans lived in it.” The map has every single detail of the city written down in dark blue ink, with measurements of buildings and sketches of costumes and charts of changes in the weather all added in the margins by the map's twelve previous owners, all of whom are now dead. I have spent more hours than I can ever count going over every inch of this map as carefully as possible, so that everything that can be learned from it can be copied into my files and then into books such as this one, in the hopes that the general public will finally learn every detail of the treacherous conspiracy I have spent my life trying to escape. The map contains thousands of fascinating things that have been discovered by all sorts of explorers, criminal investigators, and circus performers over the years, but the most fascinating thing that the map contains was discovered just at this moment by the three Baudelaire children. Sometimes, in the dead of night when I cannot sleep, I rise from my bed and work the code on the small wooden box to retrieve the silver key that opens the slightly larger wooden box so I can sit at my desk and look once again, by candlelight, at the two dotted lines indicating the underground hallway that begins at the bottom of the elevator shaft at 667 Dark Avenue and ends at the trapdoor that the Baudelaires managed to open with their ersatz crowbars. I stare and stare at the part of the city where the orphans climbed out of that ghastly corridor, but no matter how much I stare I can scarcely believe my own eyes, any more than the youngsters could believe theirs.

The siblings had been in darkness for so long that their eyes took a long time to get used to properly lit surroundings, and they stood for a moment, rubbing their eyes and trying to see exactly where the trapdoor had led them. But in the sudden brightness of the morning sun, the only thing the children could see was the chubby shadow of a man standing near them.

“Excuse me,” Violet called, while her eyes were still adjusting. “We need to get to Veblen Hall. It’s an emergency. Could you tell me where it is?”

“Ju-just two blo-blocks that way,” the shadow stuttered, and the children gradually realized that it was a slightly overweight mailman, pointing down the street and looking at the children fearfully. “Please don’t hurt me,” the mailman added, stepping away from the youngsters.

“We’re not going to hurt you,” Klaus said, wiping ashes off his glasses.

“Ghosts always say that,” the mailman said, “but then they hurt you anyway.”

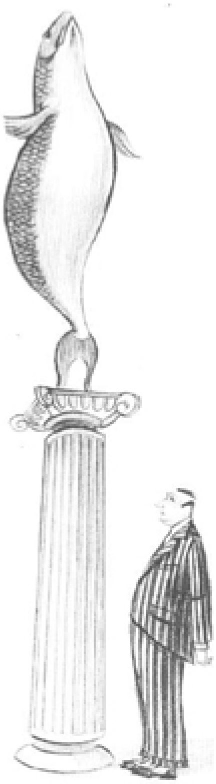
“But we’re not ghosts,” Violet said.

“Don’t tell me you’re not ghosts,” the mailman replied. “I saw you rise out of the ashes myself, as if you had come from the center of the earth. People have always said it’s haunted here on the empty lot where the Baudelaire mansion burned down, and now I know it’s true.”

The mailman ran away before the Baudelaires could reply, but the three children were too amazed by his words to speak to him anyway. They blinked and blinked in the morning sun, and finally their eyes adjusted enough to see that the mailman was right. It was true. It was not true that the three children were ghosts, of course. They were not spooky creatures who had risen from the center of the earth, but three orphans who had hoisted themselves out of the hallway. But the mailman had spoken the truth when he had told them where they were. The Baudelaire orphans looked around them, and huddled together as if they were still in a dark hallway instead of outdoors in broad daylight, standing amid the ashy ruins of their destroyed home.

CHAPTER
Twelve

Several years before the Baudelaires were born, Veblen Hall won the prestigious Door Prize, an award given each year to the city's best-constructed opening, and if you ever find yourself standing in front of Veblen Hall, as the Baudelaire orphans did that morning, you will immediately see why the committee awarded the shiny pink trophy to the door's polished wooden planks, its exquisite brass hinges and its gorgeous, shiny doorknob, fashioned out of the world's second-finest crystal. But the three siblings were in no state to appreciate architectural detail. Violet led the way up the stairs to Veblen Hall and grabbed the doorknob without a thought to the ashy smear she would leave on its polished surface. If I had been with the Baudelaires, I never would have opened the award-winning door. I would have considered myself lucky to have gotten out of the net suspended in the middle of the elevator shaft, and to have escaped Gunther's evil plan, and I would have fled to some remote corner of the world and hid from Gunther and his associates for the rest of my life rather than risk another encounter with this treacherous villain—an encounter, I'm sorry to say, that will only bring more misery into the three orphans' lives. But these three children were far more courageous than I shall ever be, and they paused just for a moment to gather all of this courage up and use it.



“Beyond this doorknob,” Violet said, “is our last chance at revealing Gunther’s true identity and his terrible plans.”

“Just past those brass hinges,” Klaus said, “is our final opportunity to save the Quagmires from being smuggled out of the country.”

“Sorusu,” Sunny said, which meant “Behind those wooden planks lies the answer to the mystery of V.F.D., and why the secret hallway led us to the place where the Baudelaire mansion burned to the ground, killing our parents, and beginning the series of unfortunate events that haunt us wherever we go.”

The Baudelaires looked at one another and stood up as straight as they could, as if their backbones were as strong as their courage, and Violet opened the door of Veblen Hall; and instantly the orphans found themselves in the middle of a hubbub, a word which here means “a huge crowd of people in an enormous, fancy room.” Veblen Hall had a very high ceiling, a very shiny floor, and one massive window that had won first runner-up for the Window Prize the previous year. Hanging from the ceiling were three huge banners, one with the word “In” written on it, one with the word “Auction” written on it, and one last one, twice as big as the others, with a huge portrait of Gunther. Standing on the floor were at least two hundred people, and the Baudelaires could tell that it was a very in crowd. Almost everyone was wearing pinstripe suits, sipping tall frosty glasses of parsley soda, and eating salmon puffs offered by some costumed waiters from Café Salmonella, which had apparently been hired to cater the auction. The Baudelaires were in regular clothes rather than pinstripes, and they were covered in dirt from the tiny, filthy room at the bottom of the elevator shaft, and in ashes from the Baudelaire lot where the hallway had led them. The in crowd would have frowned upon such attire had they noticed the children, but everyone was too busy gazing at the far end of the room to turn around and see who had walked through the award-winning door.

For at the far end of Veblen Hall, underneath the biggest banner and in front of the massive window, Gunther was standing up on a small stage and speaking into a microphone. On one side of him was a small glass vase with blue flowers painted on it, and on the other was Esmé, who was sitting in a fancy chair and gazing at Gunther as if he were the cat’s pajamas, a phrase which here means “a charming and handsome gentleman instead of a cruel and dishonest villain.”

“Lot #46, please,” Gunther was saying into the microphone. With all of their exploration of dark passageways, the Baudelaires had almost forgotten that Gunther was pretending that he wasn’t fluent in English. “Please, gentlemen and ladies, see the vase with blue flowers. Vases in. Glass in. Flowers in, please, especially the flowers that are blue. Who bid?”

“One hundred,” called out a voice from the crowd.

“One hundred fifty,” another voice said.

“Two hundred,” another said.

“Two hundred fifty,” returned the person who had bid first.

“Two hundred fifty-three,” another said.

“We’re just in time,” Klaus whispered to Violet. “V.F.D. is Lot #50. Do we wait to speak up until then, or do we confront Gunther right now?”

“I don’t know,” Violet whispered back. “We were so focused on getting to Veblen Hall in time that we forgot to think up a plan of action.”

“Is two hundred fifty-three last bidding of people, please?” Gunther asked, into the microphone. “O.K. Here is vase, please. Give money, please, to Mrs. Squalor.” A pinstriped woman walked to the edge of the stage and handed a stack of bills to Esmé, who smiled greedily and handed her the vase in exchange. Watching Esmé count the pile of bills and then calmly place them in her pinstripe purse, while somewhere backstage the Quagmires were trapped inside whatever V.F.D. was, made the Baudelaires feel sick to their stomachs.

“Evomer,” Sunny said, which meant “I can’t stand it any longer. Let’s tell everyone in this room what is really going on.”

“Excuse me,” said somebody, and the three children looked up to see a stern-looking man peering down at them from behind some very large sunglasses. He was holding a salmon puff in one hand and pointing at the Baudelaires with the other. “I’m going to have to ask you to leave Veblen Hall at once,” he said. “This is the In Auction. It’s no place for grimy little children like yourselves.”

“But we’re supposed to be here,” Violet said, thinking quickly. “We’re meeting our guardians.”

“Don’t make me laugh,” the man said, although it looked like he had never laughed in his life. “What sort of people would be caring for such dirty little kids?”

“Jerome and Esmé Squalor,” Klaus said. “We’ve been living in their penthouse.”

“We’ll see about this,” the man said. “Jerry, get over here!”

At the sound of the man's raised voice, a few people turned around and looked at the children, but almost everyone kept listening to Gunther as he began to auction off Lot #47, which he explained was a pair of ballet slippers, please, made of chocolate. Jerome detached himself from a small circle of people and walked over to the stern man to see what the matter was. When he caught sight of the orphans, he looked as if you could have knocked him over with a feather, a phrase which here means he seemed happy but extremely surprised to see them.

"I'm very happy to see you," he said, "but extremely surprised. Esmé told me you weren't feeling very well."

"So you know these children, Jerome?" the man in sunglasses said.

"Of course I know them," Jerome replied. "They're the Baudelaires. I was just telling you about them."

"Oh yes," the man said, losing interest. "Well, if they're orphans, then I guess it's O.K. for them to be here. But Jerry, you've got to buy them some new clothes!"

The man walked away before Jerome could reply. "I don't like to be called Jerry," he admitted to the children, "but I don't like to argue with him, either. Well, Baudelaires, are you feeling better?"

The children stood for a moment and looked up at their guardian. They noticed that he had a half-eaten salmon puff in his hand, even though he had told the siblings that he didn't like salmon. Jerome had probably not wanted to argue with the waiters in the salmon costumes, either. The Baudelaires looked at him, and then looked at one another. They did not feel better at all. They knew that Jerome would not want to argue with them if they told him once more about Gunther's true identity. He would not want to argue with Esmé if they told him about her part in the treacherous scheme. And he would not want to argue with Gunther if they told him that the Quagmires were trapped inside one of the items at the In Auction. The Baudelaires did not feel better at all as they realized that the only person who could help them was someone who could be knocked over with a feather.

“Menrov?” Sunny said.

“Menrov?” Jerome repeated, smiling down at the littlest Baudelaire. “What does ‘Menrov?’ mean?”

“I’ll tell you what it means,” Klaus said, thinking quickly. Perhaps there was a way to have Jerome help them, without making him argue with anyone. “It means ‘Would you do us a favor, Jerome?’”

Violet and Sunny looked at their brother curiously. “Menrov?” didn’t mean “Would you do us a favor, Jerome?” and Klaus most certainly knew it. “Menrov?” meant something more like “Should we try to tell Jerome about Gunther and Esmé and the Quagmire triplets?” but the sisters kept quiet, knowing that Klaus must have a good reason to lie to his guardian.

“Of course I’ll do you a favor,” Jerome said. “What is it?”

“My sisters and I would really like to own one of the lots at this auction,” Klaus said. “We were wondering if you might buy it for us, as a gift.”

“I suppose so,” Jerome said. “I didn’t know you three were interested in in items.”

“Oh, yes,” Violet said, understanding at once what Klaus was up to. “We’re very anxious to own Lot #50—V.F.D.”

“V.F.D.?” Jerome asked. “What does that stand for?”

“It’s a surprise,” Klaus said quickly. “Would you bid for it?”

“If it’s very important to you,” Jerome said, “I suppose I will, but I don’t want you to get spoiled. You certainly arrived in time. It looks like Gunther is just finishing the bidding on those ballet shoes, so we’re coming right up to Lot #50. Let’s go watch the auction from where I was standing. There’s an excellent view of the stage, and there’s a friend of yours standing with me.”

“A friend of ours?” Violet asked.

“You’ll see,” Jerome said, and they did see. When they followed Jerome across the enormous room to watch the auction underneath the “In” banner, they found Mr. Poe, holding a glass of parsley soda and coughing into his white handkerchief.

“You could knock me over with a feather,” Mr. Poe said, when he was done coughing. “What are you Baudelaires doing here?”

“What are *you* doing here?” Klaus asked. “You told us you would be on a helicopter ride to a mountain peak.”

Mr. Poe paused to cough into his white handkerchief again. “The reports about the mountain peak turned out to be false,” Mr. Poe said, when the coughing fit had passed. “I now know for certain that the Quagmire twins are being forced to work at a glue factory nearby. I’m heading over there later, but I wanted to stop by the In Auction. Now that I’m Vice President in Charge of Orphan Affairs, I’m making more money, and my wife wanted to see if I could buy a bit of ocean decoration.”

“But—” Violet started to say, but Mr. Poe shushed her.

“Shush,” he said. “Gunther is beginning Lot #48, and that’s what I want to bid on.”

“Please, Lot #48,” Gunther announced. His shiny eyes regarded the crowd from behind his monocle, but he did not appear to spot the Baudelaires. “Is large statue of fish, painted red, please. Very big, very in. Big enough to sleep inside this fish, if you are in the mood, please. Who bid?”

“I bid, Gunther,” Mr. Poe called out. “One hundred.”

“Two hundred,” called out another voice from the crowd.

Klaus leaned in close to Mr. Poe to talk to him without Jerome hearing. “Mr. Poe, there’s something you should know about Gunther,” he said, thinking that if he could convince Mr. Poe, then the Baudelaires wouldn’t have to continue their charade, a word which here means “pretending to want V.F.D. so Jerome would bid on it and save the Quagmires without knowing it." "He's really—"

"An in auctioneer, I know," Mr. Poe finished for him, and bid again. "Two hundred six."

"Three hundred," replied the other voice.

"No, no," Violet said. "He's not really an auctioneer at all. He's Count Olaf in disguise."

"Three hundred twelve," Mr. Poe called out, and then frowned down at the children. "Don't be ridiculous," he said to them. "Count Olaf is a criminal. Gunther is just a foreigner. I can't remember the word for a fear of foreigners, but I am surprised that you children have such a fear."

"Four hundred," called out the other voice.

"The word is 'xenophobia,'" Klaus said, "but it doesn't apply here, because Gunther's not really a foreigner. He's not even really Gunther!"

Mr. Poe took out his handkerchief again, and the Baudelaires waited as he coughed into it before replying. "You're not making any sense," he said finally. "Can we please discuss this after I buy this ocean decoration? I bid four hundred nine!"

"Five hundred," called out the other voice.

"I give up," Mr. Poe said, and coughed into his handkerchief. "Five hundred is too much to pay for a big herring statue."

"Five hundred is highest bid, please," Gunther said, and smiled at someone in the crowd. "Please will the winner give money to Mrs. Squalor, please."

"Why, look, children," Jerome said. "The doorman bought that big red fish."

“The doorman?” Mr. Poe said, as the doorman handed Esmé a sack of coins and, with difficulty, lifted the enormous red fish statue off the stage, his hands still hidden in his long, long sleeves. “I’m surprised that a doorman can afford to buy anything at the In Auction.”

“He told me once he was an actor, too,” Jerome said. “He’s an interesting fellow. Care to meet him?”

“That’s very nice of you,” Mr. Poe said, and coughed into his handkerchief. “I’m certainly meeting all sorts of interesting people since my promotion.”

The doorman was struggling past the children with his scarlet herring when Jerome tapped him on the shoulder. “Come meet Mr. Poe,” he said.

“I don’t have time to meet anyone,” the doorman replied. “I have to get this in the boss’s truck and—” The doorman stopped midsentence when he caught sight of the Baudelaire children. “You’re not supposed to be here!” he said. “You’re not supposed to have left the penthouse.”

“Oh, but they’re feeling better now,” Jerome said, but the doorman wasn’t listening. He had turned around—swatting several pinstripe members of the crowd with his fish statue as he did so—and was calling up to the people on the stage. “Hey, boss!” he said, and both Esmé and Gunther turned to look as he pointed at the three Baudelaires. “The orphans are here!”

Esmé gasped, and she was so affected by the element of surprise that she almost dropped her sack of coins, but Gunther merely turned his head and looked directly at the children. His eyes shone very, very brightly, even the one behind his monocle, and the Baudelaires were horrified to recognize his expression. Gunther was smiling as if he had just told a joke, and it was an expression he wore when his treacherous mind was working its hardest.

“Orphans in,” he said, still insisting on pretending that he could not speak English properly. “O.K. for orphans to be here, please.” Esmé looked curiously at Gunther, but then shrugged, and gestured to the doorman with a long-nailed hand that everything was O.K. The doorman shrugged back at her, and then gave the Baudelaires a strange smile and walked out of the award-winning door. “We will skip Lot #49, please,” Gunther continued. “We will bid on Lot #50, please, and then, please, auction is over.”

“But what about all the other items?” someone called.

“Skip ’em,” Esmé said dismissively. “I’ve made enough money today.”

“I never thought I’d hear Esmé say that,” Jerome murmured.

“Lot #50, please,” Gunther announced, and pushed an enormous cardboard box onto the stage. It was as big as the fish statue—just the right size for storing two small children. The box had “V.F.D.” printed on it in big black letters, and the Baudelaires saw that some tiny airholes had been poked in the top. The three siblings could picture their friends, trapped inside the box and terrified that they were about to be smuggled out of the city. “V.F.D. please,” Gunther said. “Who bid?”

“I bid twenty,” Jerome said, and winked at the children.

“What in the world is ‘V.F.D.’?” Mr. Poe asked.

Violet knew that she had no time to try to explain everything to Mr. Poe. “It’s a surprise,” she said. “Stick around and find out.”

“Fifty,” said another voice, and the Baudelaires turned to see that this second bid had come from the man in sunglasses who had asked them to leave.

“That doesn’t look like one of Gunther’s assistants,” Klaus whispered to his sisters.

“You never know,” Violet replied. “They’re hard to spot.”

“Fifty-five,” Jerome called out. Esmé frowned at him, and then gave the Baudelaires a very mean glare.

“One hundred,” the man in sunglasses said.

“Goodness, children,” Jerome said. “This is getting very expensive. Are you sure you want this V.F.D.?”

“You’re buying this for the children?” Mr. Poe said. “Please, Mr. Squalor, don’t spoil these youngsters.”

“He’s not spoiling us!” Violet said, afraid that Gunther would stop the bidding. “Please, Jerome, *please* buy Lot #50 for us. We’ll explain everything later.”

Jerome sighed. “Very well,” he said. “I guess it’s only natural that you’d want some in things, after spending time with Esmé. I bid one hundred eight.”

“Two hundred,” the man in sunglasses said. The Baudelaires craned their necks to try and get a better look at him, but the man in sunglasses didn’t look any more familiar.

“Two hundred four,” Jerome said, and then looked down at the children. “I won’t bid any higher, children. This is getting much too expensive, and bidding is too much like arguing for me to enjoy it.”

“Three hundred,” the man in sunglasses said, and the Baudelaire children looked at one another in horror. What could they do? Their friends were about to slip out of their grasp.

“Please, Jerome,” Violet said. “I beg of you, *please* buy this for us.”

Jerome shook his head. “Someday you’ll understand,” he said. “It’s not worth it to spend money on silly in things.”

Klaus turned to Mr. Poe. “Mr. Poe,” he said, “would you be willing to loan us some money from the bank?”

“To buy a cardboard box?” Mr. Poe said. “I should say not. Ocean decorations are one thing, but I don’t want you children wasting money on a box of something, no matter what it is.”

“Final bid is three hundred, please,” Gunther said, turning and giving Esmé a monocled wink. “Please, sir, if—”

“Thousand!”

Gunther stopped at the sound of a new bidder for Lot #50. Esmé’s eyes widened, and she grinned at the thought of putting such an enormous sum in her pinstripe purse. The in crowd looked around, trying to figure out where this new voice was coming from, but nobody suspected such a long and valuable word would originate in the mouth of a tiny baby who was no bigger than a salami.

“Thousand!” Sunny shrieked again, and her siblings held their breath. They knew, of course, that their sister had no such sum of money, but they hoped that Gunther could not see where this bid was coming from, and would be too greedy to find out. The ersatz auctioneer looked at Esmé, and then again out into the crowd.

“Where in the world did Sunny get that kind of money?” Jerome asked Mr. Poe.

“Well, when the children were in boarding school,” Mr. Poe answered, “Sunny worked as a receptionist, but I had no idea that her salary was that high.”

“Thousand!” Sunny insisted, and finally Gunther gave in.

“The highest bid is now one thousand,” he said, and then remembered to pretend that he wasn’t fluent in English. “Please,” he added.

“Good grief!” the man in sunglasses said. “I’m not going to pay more than one thousand for V.F.D. It’s not worth it.”

“It is to us,” Violet said fiercely, and the three children walked toward the stage. Every eye in the crowd fell on the siblings as they left an ashy trail behind them on their way to the cardboard box. Jerome looked confused. Mr. Poe looked befuddled, a word which here means “as confused as Jerome.” Esmé looked vicious. The man in sunglasses looked like he had lost an auction. And Gunther kept smiling, as if a joke he had told was only getting funnier and funnier. Violet and Klaus climbed up on the stage and then hoisted Sunny up alongside them, and the three orphans looked fiercely at the terrible man who had imprisoned their friends.

“Give your thousand, please, to Mrs. Squalor,” Gunther said, grinning down at the children. “And then auction is over.”

“The only thing that is over,” Klaus said, “is your horrible plan.”

“Silko!” Sunny agreed, and then, using her teeth even though they were still sore from climbing up the elevator shaft, the youngest Baudelaire bit into the cardboard box and began ripping it apart, hoping that she wasn’t hurting Duncan and Isadora Quagmire as she did so.

“Wait a minute, kids!” Esmé snarled, getting out of her fancy chair and stomping over to the box. “You can’t open the box until you give me the money. That’s illegal!”

“What is illegal,” Klaus said, “is auctioning off children. And soon this whole room will see that you have broken the law!”

“What’s this?” Mr. Poe asked, striding toward the stage. Jerome followed him, looking from the orphans to his wife in confusion.

“The Quagmire triplets are in this box,” Violet explained, helping her sister tear it open. “Gunther and Esmé are trying to smuggle them out of the country.”

“What?” Jerome cried. “Esmé is this true?”

Esmé did not reply, but in a moment everyone would see if it was true or not. The children had torn away a large section of the cardboard, and they could see a layer of white paper inside, as if Gunther had wrapped up the Quagmires the way you might have the butcher wrap up a pair of chicken breasts.

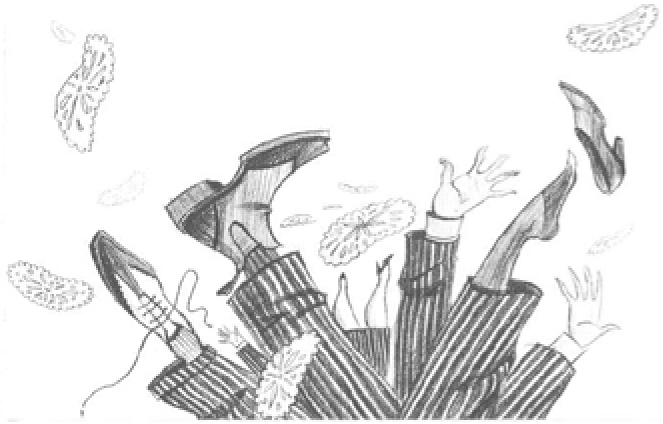
“Hang on, Duncan!” Violet called, into the paper. “Just a few more seconds, Isadora! We’re getting you out of there!”

Mr. Poe frowned, and coughed into his white handkerchief. “Now look here, Baudelaires,” he said sternly, when his coughing spell was over, “I have reliable information that the Quagmires are in a glue factory, not inside a cardboard box.”

“We’ll see about that,” Klaus said, and Sunny gave the box another big bite. With a loud shredding sound it split right down the middle, and the contents of the box spilled out all over the stage. It is necessary to use the expression “a red herring” to describe what was inside the cardboard box. A red herring, of course, is a type of fish, but it is also an expression that means “a distracting and misleading clue.” Gunther had used the initials V.F.D. on the box to mislead the Baudelaires into thinking that their friends were trapped inside, and I’m sorry to tell you that the Baudelaires did not realize it was a red herring until they looked around the stage and saw what the box contained.

CHAPTER
Thirteen

“*These* are *doilies*,” Violet cried. “This box is full of *doilies*!” And it was true. Scattered around the stage, spilling out of the remains of the cardboard box, were hundreds and hundreds of small, round napkins with a strip of lace around them—the sort of napkins that you might use to decorate a plate of cookies at a fancy tea party.



“Of course,” the man in sunglasses said. He approached the stage and removed his sunglasses, and the Baudelaires could see that he wasn’t one of Gunther’s associates after all. He was just a bidder, in a pinstripe suit. “I was going to give them to my brother for a birthday present. They’re Very Fancy Doilies. What else could V.F.D. stand for?”

“Yes,” Gunther said, smiling at the children. “What else could it stand for, please?”

“I don’t know,” Violet said, “but the Quagmires didn’t find out a secret about fancy napkins. Where have you put them, Olaf?”

“What is Olaf, please?” Gunther asked.

“Now, Violet,” Jerome said. “We agreed that we wouldn’t argue about Gunther anymore. Please excuse these children, Gunther. I think they must be ill.”

“We’re not ill!” Klaus cried. “We’ve been tricked! This box of doilies was a red herring!”

“But the red herring was Lot #48,” someone in the crowd said.

“Children, I’m very disturbed by your behavior,” Mr. Poe said. “You look like you haven’t washed in a week. You’re spending your money on ridiculous items. You run around accusing everybody of being Count Olaf in disguise. And now you’ve made a big mess of doilies on the floor. Someone is likely to trip and fall on all these slippery napkins. I would have thought that the Squalors would be raising you better than this.”

“Well, we’re not going to raise them anymore,” Esmé said. “Not after they’ve made such a spectacle of themselves. Mr. Poe, I want these terrible children placed out of my care. It’s not worth it to have orphans, even if they’re in.”

“Esmé!” Jerome cried. “They lost their parents! Where else can they go?”

“Don’t argue with me,” Esmé snapped, “and I’ll tell you where they can go. They can—”

“With me, please,” Gunther said, and placed one of his scraggly hands on Violet’s shoulder. Violet remembered when this treacherous villain had plotted to marry her, and shuddered underneath his greedy fingers. “I am loving of the children. I would be happy, please, to raise three children of my own.” He put his other scraggly hand on Klaus’s shoulder, and then stepped forward as if he was going to put one of his boots on Sunny’s shoulder so all three Baudelaires would be locked in a sinister embrace. But Gunther’s foot did not land on Sunny’s shoulder. It landed on a doily, and in a second Mr. Poe’s prediction that someone would trip and fall came true.

With a papery *thump*! Gunther was suddenly on the ground, his arms flailing wildly in the doilies and his legs flailing madly on the floor of the stage. “Please!” he shouted as he hit the ground, but his wiggling limbs only made him slip more, and the doilies began to spread out across the stage and fall to the floor of Veblen Hall. The Baudelaires watched the fancy napkins flutter around them, making flimsy, whispering sounds as they fell, but then they heard two weighty sounds, one after the other, as if Gunther’s fall had made something heavier fall to the floor, and when they turned their heads to follow the sound, they saw Gunther’s boots lying on the floor, one at Jerome’s feet and one at Mr. Poe’s.

“Please!” Gunther shouted again, as he struggled to stand up, but when he finally got to his feet, everyone else in the room was looking at them.

“Look!” the man who had been wearing sunglasses said. “The auctioneer wasn’t wearing any socks! That’s not very polite!”

“And look!” someone else said. “He has a doily stuck between two of his toes! That’s not very comfortable!”

“And look!” Jerome said. “He has a tattoo of an eye on his ankle! He’s not Gunther!”

“He’s not an auctioneer!” Mr. Poe cried. “He’s not even a foreigner! He’s Count Olaf!”

“He’s more than Count Olaf,” Esmé said, walking slowly toward the terrible villain. “He’s a genius! He’s a wonderful acting teacher! And he’s the handsomest, innest man in town!”

“Don’t be absurd!” Jerome said. “Ruthless kidnapping villains aren’t in!”

“You’re right,” said Count Olaf, and what a relief it is to call him by his proper name. Olaf tossed away his monocle and put his arm around Esmé. “We’re not in. We’re out—out of the city! Come on, Esmé!”

With a shriek of laughter, Olaf took Esmé's hand and leaped from the stage, elbowing aside the in crowd as he began running toward the exit.

"They're escaping!" Violet cried, and jumped off the stage to chase after them. Klaus and Sunny followed her as fast as their legs could carry them, but Olaf and Esmé had longer legs, which in this case was just as unfair an advantage as the element of surprise. By the time the Baudelaires had run to the banner with Gunther's face on it, Olaf and Esmé had reached the banner with "Auction" printed on it, and by the time the children reached that banner, the two villains had run past the "In" banner and through the award-winning door of Veblen Hall.

"Egad!" Mr. Poe cried. "We can't let that dreadful man escape for the sixth time! After him, everyone! That man is wanted for a wide variety of violent and financial crimes!"

The in crowd sprang into action, and began chasing after Olaf and Esmé, and you may choose to believe, as this story nears its conclusion, that with so many people chasing after this wretched villain, it would be impossible for him to escape. You may wish to close this book without finishing it, and imagine that Olaf and Esmé were captured, and that the Quagmire triplets were rescued, and that the true meaning of V.F.D. was discovered and that the mystery of the secret hallway to the ruined Baudelaire mansion was solved and that everyone held a delightful picnic to celebrate all this good fortune and that there were enough ice cream sandwiches to go around. I certainly wouldn't blame you for imagining these things, because I imagine them all the time. Late at night, when not even the map of the city can comfort me, I close my eyes and imagine all those happy comforting things surrounding the Baudelaire children, instead of all those doilies that surrounded them and brought yet another scoop of misfortune into their lives. Because when Count Olaf and Esmé Squalor flung open the door of Veblen Hall, they let in an afternoon breeze that made all the very fancy doilies flutter over the Baudelaires' heads and then settle back down on the floor behind them, and in one slippery moment the entire in crowd was falling all over one another in a papery, pinstripe blur. Mr. Poe fell on Jerome. Jerome fell on the man who had been wearing sunglasses, and his sunglasses fell on the woman who had bid highest on

Lot #47. That woman dropped her chocolate ballet slippers, and those slippers fell on Count Olaf's boots, and those boots fell on three more doilies that made four more people slip and fall on one another and soon the entire crowd was in a hopeless tangle.

But the Baudelaires did not even glance back to see the latest grief that the doilies had caused. They kept their eyes on the pair of loathsome people who were running down the steps of Veblen Hall toward a big black pickup truck. Behind the wheel of the pickup truck was the doorman, who had finally done the sensible thing and rolled up his oversized sleeves, but that must have been a difficult task, for as the children gazed into the truck they caught a glimpse of two hooks where the doorman's hands should have been.

"The hook-handed man!" Klaus cried. "He was right under our noses the entire time!"

Count Olaf turned to sneer at the children just as he reached the pickup truck. "He might have been right under your noses," he snarled, "but soon he will be at your throats. I'll be back, Baudelaires! Soon the Quagmire sapphires will be mine, but I haven't forgotten about your fortune!"

"Gonope?" Sunny shrieked, and Violet was quick to translate.

"Where are Duncan and Isadora?" she said. "Where have you taken them?"

Olaf and Esmé looked at one another, and burst into laughter as they slipped into the black truck. Esmé jerked a long-nailed thumb toward the flatbed, which is the word for the back part of a pickup where things are stored. "We used two red herrings to fool you," she said, as the truck's engine roared into life. The children could see, in the back of the truck, the big red herring that had been Lot #48 in the In Auction.

"The Quagmires!" Klaus cried. "Olaf has them trapped inside that statue!" The orphans raced down the steps of the hall, and once again, you may find it more pleasant to put down this book, and close your eyes, and imagine a better ending to this tale than the one that I must write. You may imagine, for instance, that as the Baudelaires reached the truck, they heard the sound of the engine stalling, instead of the tooting of the horn as the hook-handed man drove his bosses away. You may imagine that the children heard the sounds of the Quagmires escaping from the statue of the herring, instead of the word “Toodle-oo!” coming from Esmé’s villainous mouth. And you may imagine the sound of police sirens as Count Olaf was caught at last, instead of the weeping of the Baudelaire orphans as the black truck rounded the corner and disappeared from view.

But your imaginings would be ersatz, as all imaginings are. They are as untrue as the ersatz auctioneer who found the Baudelaires at the Squalors’ penthouse, and the ersatz elevator outside their front door and the ersatz guardian who pushed them down the deep pit of the elevator shaft. Esmé hid her evil plan behind her reputation as the city’s sixth most important financial advisor, and Count Olaf hid his identity behind a monocle and some black boots, and the dark passageway hid its secrets behind a pair of sliding elevator doors, but as much as it pains me to tell you that the Baudelaire orphans stood on the steps of Veblen Hall, weeping with anguish and frustration as Count Olaf rode away with the Quagmire triplets, I cannot hide the unfortunate truths of the Baudelaires’ lives behind an ersatz happy ending.

The Baudelaire orphans stood on the steps of Veblen Hall, weeping with anguish and frustration as Count Olaf rode away with the Quagmire triplets, and the sight of Mr. Poe emerging from the award-winning door, with a doily in his hair and a look of panic in his eye, only made them weep harder.

“I’ll call the police,” Mr. Poe said, “and they’ll capture Count Olaf in no time at all,” but the Baudelaires knew that this statement was as ersatz as Gunther’s improper English. They knew that Olaf was far too clever to be captured by the police, and I’m sorry to say that by the time two detectives found the big black pickup truck, abandoned outside St. Carl’s Cathedral with the motor still running, Olaf had already transferred the Quagmires from the red herring to a shiny black instrument case, which he told the bus driver was a tuba he was bringing to his aunt. The three siblings watched Mr. Poe scurry back into Veblen Hall to ask members of the in crowd where he could find a phone booth, and they knew that the banker was not going to be of any help.

“I think Mr. Poe will be a great deal of help,” Jerome said, as he walked out of Veblen Hall and sat down on the steps to try to comfort the children. “He’s going to call the police, and give them a description of Olaf.”

“But Olaf is always in disguise,” Violet said miserably, wiping her eyes. “You never know what he’ll look like until you see him.”

“Well, I’m going to make sure you never see him again,” Jerome promised. “Esmé may have left—and I’m not going to argue with her—but I’m still your guardian, and I’m going to take you far, far away from here, so far away that you’ll forget all about Count Olaf and the Quagmires and everything else.”

“Forget about Olaf?” Klaus asked. “How can we forget about him? We’ll never forget his treachery, no matter where we live.”

“And we’ll never forget the Quagmires, either,” Violet said. “I don’t *want* to forget about them. We have to figure out where he’s taking our friends, and how to rescue them.”

“Tercul!” Sunny said, which meant something along the lines of “And we don’t want to forget about everything else, either—like the underground hallway that led to our ruined mansion, and the real meaning of V.F.D.!”

“My sister is right,” Klaus said. “We have to track down Olaf and learn all the secrets he’s keeping from us.”

“We’re not going to track down Olaf,” Jerome said, shuddering at the thought. “We’ll be lucky if he doesn’t track us down. As your guardian, I cannot allow you to try to find such a dangerous man. Wouldn’t you rather live safely with me?”

“Yes,” Violet admitted, “but our friends are in grave danger. We *must* go and rescue them.”

“Well, I don’t want to argue,” Jerome said. “If you’ve made up your mind, then you’ve made up your mind. I’ll tell Mr. Poe to find you another guardian.”

“You mean you won’t help us?” Klaus asked.

Jerome sighed, and kissed each Baudelaire on the forehead. “You children are very dear to me,” he said, “but I don’t have your courage. Your mother always said I wasn’t brave enough, and I guess she was right. Good luck, Baudelaires. I think you will need it.”

The children watched in amazement as Jerome walked away, not even looking back at the three orphans he was leaving behind. They found their eyes brimming with tears once more as they watched him disappear from sight. They would never see the Squalor penthouse again, or spend another night in their bedrooms, or spend even a moment in their oversized pinstripe suits. Though he was not as dastardly as Esmé or Count Olaf or the hook-handed man, Jerome was still an ersatz guardian, because a real guardian is supposed to provide a home, with a place to sleep and something to wear, and all Jerome had given them in the end was “Good luck.” Jerome reached the end of the block and turned left, and the Baudelaires were once again alone in the world.

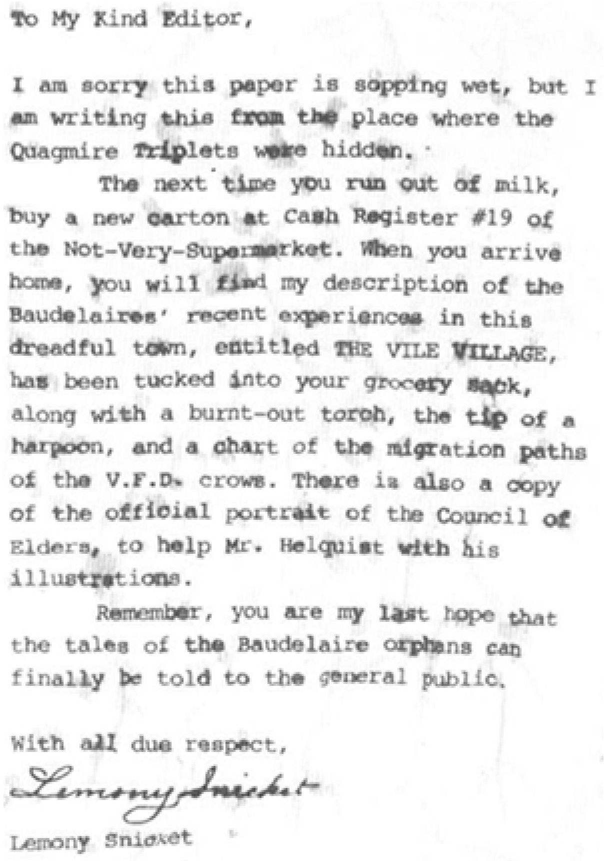
Violet sighed, and stared down the street in the direction Olaf had escaped. “I hope my inventing skills don’t fail me,” she said, “because we’re going to need more than good luck to rescue the Quagmire triplets.”

Klaus sighed, and stared down the street in the direction of the ashy remains of their first home. “I hope my research skills don’t fail me,” he said, “because we’re going to need more than good luck to solve the mystery of the hallway and the Baudelaire mansion.”

Sunny sighed, and watched as a lone doily blew down the stairs. “Bite,” she said, and she meant that she hoped her teeth wouldn’t fail her, because they’d need more than good luck to discover what V.F.D. really stood for.

The Baudelaires looked at one another with faint smiles. They were smiling because they didn’t think Violet’s inventing skills would fail, any more than Klaus's research skills would fail or Sunny's teeth would fail. But the children also knew that they wouldn't fail each other, as Jerome had failed them and as Mr. Poe was failing them now, as he dialed the wrong number and was talking to a Vietnamese restaurant instead of the police. No matter how many misfortunes had befallen them and no matter how many ersatz things they would encounter in the future, the Baudelaire orphans knew they could rely on each other for the rest of their lives, and this, at least, felt like the one thing in the world that was true.

To My Kind Editor



To My Kind Editor,

I am sorry this paper is sopping wet, but I am writing this from the place where the Quagmire Triplets were hidden.

The next time you run out of milk, buy a new carton at Cash Register #19 of the Not-Very-Supermarket. When you arrive home, you will find my description of the Baudelaires' recent experiences in this dreadful town, entitled THE VILE VILLAGE, has been tucked into your grocery sack, along with a burnt-out torch, the tip of a harpoon, and a chart of the migration paths of the V.F.D. crows. There is also a copy of the official portrait of the Council of Elders, to help Mr. Helquist with his illustrations.

Remember, you are my last hope that the tales of the Baudelaire orphans can finally be told to the general public.

With all due respect,

Lemony Snicket

Lemony Snicket

A Series of Unfortunate Events

THE BAD BEGINNING

THE REPTILE ROOM

THE WIDE WINDOW

THE MISERABLE MILL

THE AUSTERE ACADEMY

Credits

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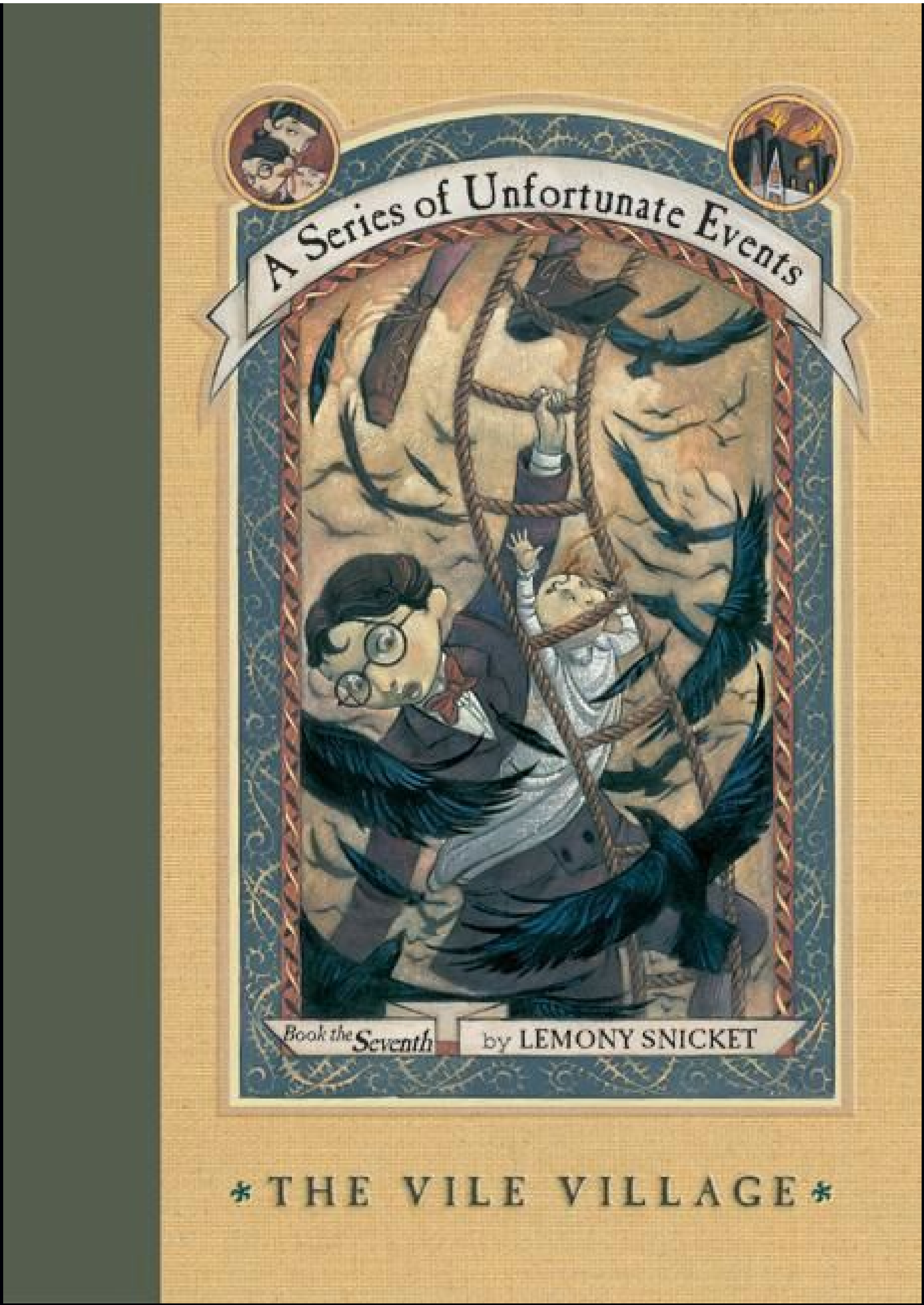
A Series of Unfortunate Events #7: The Vile Village



A Series of Unfortunate Events

Book the Seventh

by LEMONY SNICKET

THE VILE VILLAGE

A Series of Unfortunate Events

BOOK the Seventh

THE VILE VILLAGE

by **LEMONY SNICKET**

Illustrations by **Brett Helquist**

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EX
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Dear Reader,

You have undoubtedly picked up this book by mistake, so please put it down. Nobody in their right mind would read this particular book about the lives of Violet, Klaus, and Sunny Baudelaire on purpose, because each dismal moment of their stay in the village of V.F.D. has been faithfully and dreadfully recorded in these pages.

I can think of no single reason why anyone would want to open a book containing such unpleasant matters as migrating crows, an angry mob, a newspaper headline, the arrest of innocent people, the Deluxe Cell, and some very strange hats.

It is my solemn and sacred occupation to research each detail of the Baudelaire children's lives and write them all down, but you may prefer to do some other solemn and sacred thing, such as reading another book instead.

With all due respect,

Lemony Snicket

Lemony Snicket

A Series of Unfortunate Events * LEMONY SNICKET *

For Beatrice—

When we were together I felt breathless.

Now, you are.

VFD

CHAPTER
One

No matter who you are, no matter where you live, and no matter how many people are chasing you, what you don't read is often as important as what you do read. For instance, if you are walking in the mountains, and you don't read the sign that says "Beware of Cliff" because you are busy reading a joke book instead, you may suddenly find yourself walking on air rather than on a sturdy bed of rocks. If you are baking a pie for your friends, and you read an article entitled "How to Build a Chair" instead of a cookbook, your pie will probably end up tasting like wood and nails instead of like crust and fruity filling. And if you insist on reading this book instead of something more cheerful, you will most certainly find yourself moaning in despair instead of wriggling in delight, so if you have any sense at all you will put this book down and pick up another one. I know of a book, for instance, called *The Littlest Elf*, which tells the story of a teensy-weensy little man who scurries around Fairyland having all sorts of adorable adventures, and you can see at once that you should probably read *The Littlest Elf* and wriggle over the lovely things that happened to this imaginary creature in a made-up place, instead of reading this book and moaning over the terrible things that happened to the three Baudelaire orphans in the village where I am now typing these very words. The misery, woe, and treachery contained in the pages of this book are so dreadful that it is important that you don't read any more of it than you already have.

The Baudelaire orphans, at the time this story begins, were certainly wishing that they weren't reading the newspaper that was in front of their eyes. A newspaper, as I'm sure you know, is a collection of supposedly true stories written down by writers who either saw them happen or talked to people who did. These writers are called journalists, and like telephone operators, butchers, ballerinas, and people who clean up after horses, journalists can sometimes make mistakes. This was certainly the case with the front page of the morning edition of *The Daily Punctilio*, which the Baudelaire children were reading in the office of Mr. Poe. “TWINS CAPTURED BY COUNT OMAR,” the headline read, and the three siblings looked at one another in amazement over the mistakes that *The Daily Punctilio*’s journalists had made.

“‘Duncan and Isadora Quagmire,’” Violet read out loud, “‘twin children who are the only known surviving members of the Quagmire family, have been kidnapped by the notorious Count Omar. Omar is wanted by the police for a variety of dreadful crimes, and is easily recognized by his one long eyebrow, and the tattoo of an eye on his left ankle. Omar has also kidnapped Esmé Squalor, the city’s sixth most important financial advisor, for reasons unknown.’ Ugh!” The word “Ugh!” was not in the newspaper, of course, but was something Violet uttered herself as a way of saying she was too disgusted to read any further. “If I invented something as sloppily as this newspaper writes its stories,” she said, “it would fall apart immediately.” Violet, who at fourteen was the eldest Baudelaire child, was an excellent inventor, and spent a great deal of time with her hair tied up in a ribbon to keep it out of her eyes as she thought of new mechanical devices.

“And if I read books as sloppily,” Klaus said, “I wouldn’t remember one single fact.” Klaus, the middle Baudelaire, had read more books than just about anyone his own age, which was almost thirteen. At many crucial moments, his sisters had relied on him to remember a helpful fact from a book he had read years before.

“Krechin!” Sunny said. Sunny, the youngest Baudelaire, was a baby scarcely larger than a watermelon. Like many infants, Sunny often said words that were difficult to understand, like “Krechin!” which meant something along the lines of “And if I used my four big teeth to bite something as sloppily, I wouldn’t even leave one toothmark!”

Violet moved the paper closer to one of the reading lamps Mr. Poe had in his office, and began to count the errors that had appeared in the few sentences she had read. “For one thing,” she said, “the Quagmires aren’t twins. They’re triplets. The fact that their brother perished in the fire that killed their parents doesn’t change their birth identity.”

“Of course it doesn’t,” Klaus agreed. “And they were kidnapped by Count *Olaf*, not Omar. It’s difficult enough that Olaf is always in disguise, but now the newspaper has disguised his name, too.”

“Esmé!” Sunny added, and her siblings nodded. The youngest Baudelaire was talking about the part of the article that mentioned Esmé Squalor. Esmé and her husband, Jerome, had recently been the Baudelaires’ guardians, and the children had seen with their own eyes that Esmé had not been kidnapped by Count Olaf. Esmé had secretly helped Olaf with his evil scheme, and had escaped with him at the last minute.

“And ‘for reasons unknown’ is the biggest mistake of all,” Violet said glumly. “The reasons aren’t unknown. *We* know them. We know the reasons Esmé, Count Olaf, and all of Olaf’s associates have done so many terrible things. It’s because they’re terrible people.” Violet put down *The Daily Punctilio*, looked around Mr. Poe’s office, and joined her siblings in a sad, deep sigh. The Baudelaire orphans were sighing not only for the things they had read, but for the things they hadn’t read. The article had not mentioned that both the Quagmires and the Baudelaires had lost their parents in terrible fires, and that both sets of parents had left enormous fortunes behind, and that Count Olaf had cooked up all of his evil plans just to get ahold of these fortunes for himself. The newspaper had failed to note that the Quagmire triplets had been kidnapped while trying to help the Baudelaires escape from Count Olaf’s clutches, and that the Baudelaires had almost managed to rescue the Quagmires, only to find them snatched away once more. The journalists who wrote the story had not included the fact that Duncan Quagmire, who was a journalist himself, and Isadora Quagmire, who was a poet, each kept a notebook with them wherever they went, and that in their notebooks they had written down a terrible secret they had discovered about Count Olaf, but that all the Baudelaire orphans knew of this secret were the initials V.F.D., and that Violet, Klaus, and Sunny were always thinking of these three letters and what ghastly thing they could stand for. But most of all, the Baudelaire orphans had read no word about the fact that the Quagmire triplets were good friends of theirs, and that the three siblings were very worried about the Quagmires, and that every night when they tried to go to sleep, their heads were filled with terrible images of what could be happening to their friends, who were practically the only happy thing in the Baudelaires' lives since they received the news of the fire that killed their parents and began the series of unfortunate events that seemed to follow them wherever they went. The article in *The Daily Punctilio* probably did not mention these details because the journalist who wrote the story did not know about them, or did not think they were important, but the Baudelaires knew about them, and the three children sat together for a few moments and thought quietly about these very, very important details.

A fit of coughing, coming from the doorway of the office, brought them out of their thoughts, and the Baudelaires turned to see Mr. Poe coughing into a white handkerchief. Mr. Poe was a banker who had been placed in charge of the orphans' care after the fire, and I'm sorry to say that he was extremely prone to error, a phrase which here means "always had a cough, and had placed the three Baudelaire children in an assortment of dangerous positions." The first guardian Mr. Poe found for the youngsters was Count Olaf himself, and the most recent guardian he had found for them was Esmé Squalor, and in between he had placed the children in a variety of circumstances that turned out to be just as unpleasant. This morning they were supposed to learn about their new home, but so far all Mr. Poe had done was have several coughing fits and leave them alone with a poorly written newspaper.

"Good morning, children," Mr. Poe said. "I'm sorry I kept you waiting, but ever since I was promoted to Vice President in Charge of Orphan Affairs I've been very, very busy. Besides, finding you a new home has been something of a chore." He walked over to his desk, which was covered in piles of papers, and sat down in a large chair. "I've put calls in to a variety of distant relatives, but they've heard all about the terrible things that tend to happen wherever you go. Understandably, they're too skittish about Count Olaf to agree to take care of you. 'Skittish' means 'nervous,' by the way. There's one more—"

One of the three telephones on Mr. Poe's desk interrupted him with a loud, ugly ring. "Excuse me," the banker said to the children, and began to speak into the receiver. "Poe here. O.K. O.K. O.K. I thought so. O.K. O.K. Thank you, Mr. Fagin." Mr. Poe hung up the phone and made a mark on one of the papers on his desk. “That was a nineteenth cousin of yours,” Mr. Poe said, “and a last hope of mine. I thought I could persuade him to take you in, just for a couple of months, but he refused. I can’t say I blame him. I’m concerned that your reputation as troublemakers is even ruining the reputation of my bank.”

“But we’re not troublemakers,” Klaus said. “Count Olaf is the troublemaker.”

Mr. Poe took the newspaper from the children and looked at it carefully. “Well, I’m sure the story in *The Daily Punctilio* will help the authorities finally capture Olaf, and then your relatives will be less skittish.”

“But the story is full of mistakes,” Violet said. “The authorities won’t even know his real name. The newspaper calls him Omar.”

“The story was a disappointment to me, too,” Mr. Poe said. “The journalist said that the paper would put a photograph of me next to the article, with a caption about my promotion. I had my hair cut for it especially. It would have made my wife and sons very proud to see my name in the papers, so I understand why you’re disappointed that the article is about the Quagmire twins, instead of being about you.”

“We don’t care about having our names in the papers,” Klaus said, “and besides, the Quagmires are triplets, not twins.”

“The death of their brother changes their birth identity,” Mr. Poe explained sternly, “but I don’t have time to talk about this. We need to find —”

Another one of his phones rang, and Mr.Poe excused himself again. “Poe here,” he said into the receiver. “No. No. No. Yes. Yes. Yes. I don’t care. Good-bye.” He hung up the phone and coughed into his white handkerchief before wiping his mouth and turning once more to the children. “Well, that phone call solved all of your problems,” he said simply.

The Baudelaires looked at one another. Had Count Olaf been arrested? Had the Quagmires been saved? Had someone invented a way to go back in time and rescue their parents from the terrible fire? How could all of their problems have been solved with one phone call to a banker?

“Plinn?” Sunny asked.

Mr.Poe smiled. “Have you ever heard the aphorism,” he said, “‘It takes a village to raise a child’?”

The children looked at one another again, a little less hopefully this time. The quoting of an aphorism, like the angry barking of a dog or the smell of overcooked broccoli, rarely indicates that something helpful is about to happen. An aphorism is merely a small group of words arranged in a certain order because they sound good that way, but oftentimes people tend to say them as if they were saying something very mysterious and wise.

“I know it probably sounds mysterious to you,” Mr. Poe continued, “but the aphorism is actually very wise. ‘It takes a village to raise a child’ means that the responsibility for taking care of youngsters belongs to everyone in the community.”

“I think I read something about this aphorism in a book about the Mbuti pygmies,” Klaus said. “Are you sending us to live in Africa?”

“Don’t be silly,” Mr. Poe said, as if the millions of people who lived in Africa were all ridiculous. “That was the city government on the telephone. A number of villages just outside the city have signed up for a new guardian program based on the aphorism ‘It takes a village to raise a child.’ Orphans are sent to these villages, and everyone who lives there raises them together. Normally, I approve of more traditional family structures, but this is really quite convenient, and your parents’ will instructs that you be raised in the most convenient way possible.”

“Do you mean that the entire town would be in charge of us?” Violet asked. “That’s a lot of people.”

“Well, I imagine they would take turns,” Mr. Poe said, stroking his chin. “It’s not as if you would be tucked into bed by three thousand people at once.”

“Snoita!” Sunny shrieked. She meant something like “I prefer to be tucked into bed by my siblings, not by strangers!” but Mr. Poe was busy looking through his papers on his desk and didn’t answer her.

“Apparently I was mailed a brochure about this program several weeks ago,” he said, “but I guess it got lost somewhere on my desk. Oh, here it is. Take a look for yourselves.”

Mr. Poe reached across his desk to hand them a colorful brochure, and the Baudelaire orphans took a look for themselves. On the front was the aphorism ‘It takes a village to raise a child’ written in flowery letters, and inside the brochure were photographs of children with such huge smiles that the Baudelaires’ mouths ached just to look at them. A few paragraphs explained that 99 percent of the orphans participating in this program were overjoyed to have whole villages taking care of them, and that all the towns listed on the back page were eager to serve as guardians for any interested children who had lost their parents. The three Baudelaires looked at the grinning photographs and read the flowery aphorism and felt a little flutter in their stomachs. They felt more than a little nervous about having a whole town for a guardian. It was strange enough when they were in the care of various relatives. How strange would it feel if hundreds of people were trying to act as substitute Baudelaires?

“Do you think we would be safe from Count Olaf,” Violet asked hesitantly, “if we lived with an entire village?”

“I should think so,” Mr. Poe said, and coughed into his handkerchief. “With a whole village looking after you, you’ll probably be the safest you’ve ever been. Plus, thanks to the story in *The Daily Punctilio,* I’m sure Omar will be captured in no time.”

“*Olaf,*” Klaus corrected.

"Yes, yes," Mr. Poe said. "I meant to say 'Omar.' Now, what villages are listed in the brochure? You children can choose your new hometown, if you like."

Klaus turned the brochure over and read from the list of towns. "Paltryville," he said. "That's where the Lucky Smells Lumbermill was. We had a terrible time there."

"Calten!" Sunny cried, which meant something like "I wouldn't return there for all the tea in China!"

"The next village on the list is Tedia," Klaus said. "That name is familiar to me."

"That's near where Uncle Monty lived," Violet said. "Let's not live there—it'll make us miss Uncle Monty even more than we already do."

Klaus nodded in agreement. "Besides," he said, "the town is near Lousy Lane, so it probably smells like horseradish. Here's a village I've never heard of—Ophelia."

"No, no," Mr. Poe said. "I won't have you living in the same town as the Ophelia Bank. It's one of my least favorite banks, and I don't want to have to walk by it when I visit you."

"Zounce!" Sunny said, which meant "That's ridiculous!" but Klaus nudged her with his elbow and pointed to the next village listed on the brochure, and Sunny quickly changed her tune, a phrase which here means "immediately said 'Gounce!' instead, which meant something along the lines of 'Let's live there!'"

"Gounce indeed," Klaus agreed, and showed Violet what he and Sunny were talking about. Violet gasped, and the three siblings looked at one another and felt a little flutter in their stomachs again. But this was less of a nervous flutter and more of a hopeful one—a hope that maybe Mr. Poe's last phone call really had solved all their problems, and that maybe what they read right here in the brochure would turn out to be more important than what they didn't read in the newspaper. For at the bottom of the list of villages, below Paltryville and Tedia and Ophelia, was the most important thing they had read all morning. Printed in the flowery script, on the back page of the brochure Mr. Poe had given them, were the letters V.F.D.

CHAPTER
Two

When you are traveling by bus, it is always difficult to decide whether you should sit in a seat by the window, a seat on the aisle, or a seat in the middle. If you take an aisle seat, you have the advantage of being able to stretch your legs whenever you like, but you have the disadvantage of people walking by you, and they can accidentally step on your toes or spill something on your clothing. If you take a window seat, you have the advantage of getting a clear view of the scenery, but you have the disadvantage of watching insects die as they hit the glass. If you take a middle seat, you have neither of these advantages, and you have the added disadvantage of people leaning all over you when they fall asleep. You can see at once why you should always arrange to hire a limousine or rent a mule rather than take the bus to your destination.

The Baudelaire orphans, however, did not have the money to hire a limousine, and it would have taken them several weeks to reach V.F.D. by mule, so they were traveling to their new home by bus. The children had thought that it might take a lot of effort to convince Mr. Poe to choose V.F.D. as their new village guardian, but right when they saw the three initials on the brochure, one of Mr. Poe's telephones rang, and by the time he was off the phone he was too busy to argue. All he had time to do was make arrangements with the city government and take them to the bus station. As he saw them off—a phrase which here means "put the Baudelaires on a bus, rather than doing the polite thing and taking them to their new home personally"—he instructed them to report to the Town Hall of V.F.D., and made them promise not to do anything that would ruin his bank's reputation. Before they knew it, Violet was sitting in an aisle seat, brushing dirt off her coat and rubbing her sore toes, and Klaus was sitting in a window seat gazing at the scenery through a layer of dead bugs. Sunny sat between them, gnawing on the armrest.

"No lean!" she said sternly, and her brother smiled.

"Don't worry, Sunny," he said. "We'll make sure not to lean on you if we fall asleep. We don't have much time for napping, anyway—we should be at V.F.D. any minute now."

"What do you think it could stand for?" Violet asked. "Neither the brochure nor the map at the bus station showed anything more than the three initials."

"I don't know," Klaus said. "Do you think we should have told Mr. Poe about the V.F.D. secret? Maybe he could have helped us."

"I doubt it," Violet said. "He hasn't been very helpful before. I wish the Quagmires were here. I bet they could help us."

"I wish the Quagmires were here even if they couldn't help us," Klaus said, and his sisters nodded in agreement. No Baudelaire had to say anything more about how worried they were about the triplets, and they sat in silence for the rest of the ride, hoping that their arrival at V.F.D. would bring them closer to saving their friends.

"V.F.D.!" the bus driver finally called out. "Next stop V.F.D.! If you look out the window, you can see the town coming up, folks!"

"What does it look like?" Violet asked Klaus.

Klaus peered out the window past the layer of dead bugs. "Flat," he said.

Violet and Sunny leaned over to look and saw that their brother had spoken the truth. The countryside looked as if someone had drawn the line of the horizon—the word "horizon" here means "the boundary where the sky ends and the world begins"—and then forgot to draw in anything else. The land stretched out as far as the eye could see, but there was nothing for the eye to look at but flat, dry land and the occasional sheet of newspaper stirred up by the passing of the bus.

"I don't see any town at all," Klaus said. "Do you suppose it's underground?"

“Novedri!” Sunny said, which meant “Living underground would be no fun at all!”

“Maybe that’s the town over there,” Violet said, squinting to try and see as far as she could. “You see? Way out by the horizon line, there’s a hazy black blur. It looks like smoke, but maybe it’s just some buildings seen from far away.”

“I can’t see it,” Klaus said. “That smushed moth is blocking it, I think. But a hazy blur could just be fata morgana.”

“Fata?” Sunny asked.

“Fata morgana is when your eyes play tricks on you, particularly in hot weather,” Klaus explained. “It’s caused by the distortion of light through alternate layers of hot and cool air. It’s also called a mirage, but I like the name ‘fata morgana’ better.”

“Me too,” Violet agreed, “but let’s hope it’s not a mirage or fata morgana. Let’s hope it’s V.F.D.”

“V.F.D.!” the bus driver called, as the bus came to a stop. “V.F.D.! Everyone off for V.F.D.!”

The Baudelaires stood up, gathered their belongings, and walked down the aisle, but when they reached the open door of the bus they stopped and stared doubtfully out at the flat and empty landscape.

“Is this really the stop for V.F.D.?” Violet asked the driver. “I thought V.F.D. was a town.”

“It is,” the driver replied. “Just walk toward that hazy black blur out there on the horizon. I know it looks like—well, I can’t remember the phrase for when your eyes play tricks on you—but it’s really the town.”

“Couldn’t you take us a little closer?” Violet asked shyly. “We have a baby with us, and it looks like a long way to walk.”

“I wish I could help you,” the bus driver said kindly, looking down at Sunny, “but the Council of Elders has very strict rules. I have to let off all passengers for V.F.D. right here; otherwise I could be severely punished.”

“Who are the Council of Elders?” Klaus asked.

“Hey!” a voice called from the back of the bus. “Tell those kids to hurry up and get off the bus! The open door is letting bugs in!”

“Off you go, kids,” the bus driver said, and the Baudelaires stepped out of the bus onto the flat land of V.F.D. The doors shut, and with a little wave the bus driver drove off and left the children alone on the empty landscape. The siblings watched the bus get smaller and smaller as it drove away, and then turned toward the hazy black blur of their new home.

“Well, now I can see it,” Klaus said, squinting behind his glasses, “but I can’t believe it. It’s going to take the rest of the afternoon to walk all that way.”

“Then we’d better get started,” Violet said, hoisting Sunny up on top of her suitcase. “This piece of luggage has wheels,” she said to her sister, “so you can sit on top of it and I can pull you along.”

“Sanks!” Sunny said, which meant “That’s very considerate of you!” and the Baudelaires began their long walk toward the hazy black blur on the horizon. After even the first few steps, the disadvantages of the bus ride seemed like small potatoes. “Small potatoes” is a phrase which has nothing to do with root vegetables that happen to be tiny in size. Instead, it refers to the change in one’s feelings for something when it is compared with something else. If you were walking in the rain, for instance, you might be worried about getting wet, but if you turned the corner and saw a pack of vicious dogs, getting wet would suddenly become small potatoes next to getting chased down an alley and barked at, or possibly eaten. As the Baudelaires began their long journey toward V.F.D., dead bugs, stepped-on toes, and the possibility of someone leaning on them became small potatoes next to the far more unpleasant things they were encountering. Without anything else on the flat land to blow up against, the wind concentrated its efforts on Violet, a phrase which here means that before long her hair was so wildly tangled that it looked like it had never seen a comb. Because Klaus was standing behind Violet, the wind didn’t blow on him much, but without anything else in the empty landscape to cling to, the dust on the ground concentrated its efforts on the middle Baudelaire, and soon he was dusty from head to toe, as if it had been years since he’d had a shower. Perched on top of Violet’s luggage, Sunny was out of the way of the dust, but without anything else in the desolate terrain to shine on, the sun concentrated its efforts on her, which meant that she was soon as sunburned as a baby who had spent six months at the seashore, instead of a few hours on top of a suitcase.

But even as they approached the town, V.F.D. still looked as hazy as it did from far away. As the children drew closer and closer to their new home, they could see a number of buildings of different heights and widths, separated by streets both narrow and wide, and the Baudelaires could even see the tall skinny shapes of lampposts and flagpoles stretching out toward the sky. But everything they saw—from the tip of the highest building to the curve of the narrowest street—was pitch black, and seemed to be shaking slightly, as if the entire town were painted on a piece of cloth that was trembling in the wind. The buildings were trembling, and the lampposts were trembling, and even the very streets were shaking ever so slightly, and it was like no town the three Baudelaires had ever seen. It was a mystery, but unlike most mysteries, once the children reached the outskirts of V.F.D. and learned what was causing the trembling effect, they did not feel any better to have the mystery solved.

The town was covered in crows. Nearly every inch of nearly every object had a large black bird roosting on it and casting a suspicious eye on the children as they stood at the very edge of the village. There were crows sitting on the roofs of all the buildings, perching on the windowsills, and squatting on the steps and on the sidewalks. Crows were covering all of the trees, from the very top branches to the roots poking out of the crow-covered ground, and were gathered in large groups on the streets for crow conversations. Crows were covering the lampposts and flagpoles, and there were crows lying down in the gutters and resting between fence posts. There were even six crows crowded together on the sign that read “Town Hall,” with an arrow leading down a crow-covered street. The crows weren’t squawking or cawing, which is what crows often do, or playing the trumpet, which crows practically never do, but the town was far from silent. The air was filled with the sounds the crows made as they moved around. Sometimes one crow would fly from one perch to another, as if it had suddenly become bored roosting on the mailbox and thought it might be more fun to perch on the doorknob of a building. Occasionally, several crows would flutter their wings, as if they were stiff from sitting together on a bench and wanted to stretch a little bit. And almost constantly, the crows would shift in their places, trying to make themselves as comfortable as they could in such cramped quarters. All this motion explained why the town had looked so shivery in the distance, but it certainly didn’t make the Baudelaires feel any better, and they stood together in silence for quite some time, trying to find the courage to walk among all the fluttering black birds.

“I’ve read three books on crows,” Klaus said. “They’re perfectly harmless.”

“Yes, I know,” Violet said. “It’s unusual to see so many crows in one place, but they’re nothing to worry about. It’s small potatoes.”

“Zimuster,” Sunny agreed, but the three children still did not take a step closer to the crow-covered town. Despite what they had said to one another—that the crows were harmless birds, that they had nothing to worry about, and “Zimuster,” which meant something along the lines of “It would be silly to be afraid of a bunch of birds”—the Baudelaires felt they were encountering some very large potatoes indeed.

If I had been one of the Baudelaires myself, I would have stood at the edge of town for the rest of my life, whimpering with fear, rather than take even one step into the crow-covered streets, but it only took the Baudelaires a few minutes to work up the courage to walk through all of the muttering, scuffling birds to Town Hall.

“This isn’t as difficult as I thought it might be,” Violet said, in a quiet voice so as not to disturb the crows closest to her. “It’s not exactly small potatoes, but there’s enough space between the groups of crows to step.”

“That’s true,” Klaus said, his eyes on the sidewalk to avoid stepping on any crow tails. “And they tend to move aside, just a little bit, as we walk by.”

“Racah,” Sunny said, crawling as carefully as she could. She meant something along the lines of “It’s almost like walking through a quiet, but polite, crowd of very short people,” and her siblings smiled in agreement. Before too long, they had walked the entire block of the crow-lined street, and there at the far corner was a tall, impressive building that appeared to be made of white marble—at least, as far as the Baudelaires could tell, because it was as covered with crows as the rest of the neighborhood. Even the sign reading “Town Hall” looked like it read “wn Ha,” because three enormous crows were perched on it, gazing at the Baudelaires with their tiny beady eyes. Violet raised her hand as if to knock on the door, but then paused.

“What’s the matter?” Klaus said.

“Nothing,” Violet replied, but her hand still hung in the air. “I guess I’m just a little skittish. After all, this is the Town Hall of V.F.D. For all we know, behind this door may be the secret we’ve been looking for since the Quagmires were first kidnapped.”

“Maybe we shouldn’t get our hopes up,” Klaus said. “Remember, when we lived with the Squalors, we thought we had solved the V.F.D. mystery, but we were wrong. We could be wrong this time, too.”

“But we could be right,” Violet said, “and if we’re right, we should be prepared for whatever terrible thing is behind this door.”

“Unless we’re wrong,” Klaus pointed out. “Then we have nothing to be prepared for.”

“Gaksoo!” Sunny said. She meant something along the lines of “There’s no point in arguing, because we’ll never know whether we’re right or wrong until we knock on the door,” and before her siblings could answer her she crawled around Klaus’s legs and took the plunge, a phrase which here means “knocked firmly on the door with her tiny knuckles.”

“Come in!” called a very grand voice, and the Baudelaires opened the door and found themselves in a large room with a very high ceiling, a very shiny floor, and a very long bench, with very detailed portraits of crows hanging on the walls. In front of the bench was a small platform where a woman in a motorcycle helmet was standing, and behind the platform were perhaps one hundred folding chairs, most of which had a person sitting on them who was staring at the Baudelaire orphans. But the Baudelaire orphans were not staring back. The three children were staring so hard at the people sitting on the bench that they scarcely glanced at the folding chairs at all.

On the bench, sitting stiffly side by side, were twenty-five people who had two things in common. The first thing was that they were all quite old—the youngest person on the bench, a woman sitting on the far end, looked about eighty-one years of age, and everyone else looked quite a bit older. But the second thing they had in common was far more interesting. At first glance it looked like a few crows had flown in from the streets and roosted on the bench-sitters’ heads, but as the Baudelaires looked more closely, they saw that the crows did not blink their eyes, or flutter their wings or move at all in any way, and the children realized that they were nothing more than black hats, made in such a way as to resemble actual crows. It was such a strange kind of hat to be wearing that the children found themselves staring for quite a few minutes without noticing anything else.

“Are you the Baudelaire orphans?” asked one of the old men who was sitting on the bench, in a gravelly voice. As he talked, his crow head flapped slightly, which only made it look more ridiculous. “We’ve been expecting you, although I wasn’t told you would look so terrible. You three are the most windswept, dusty, and sunburned children I have ever seen. Are you sure you’re the children we’ve been waiting for?”

“Yes,” Violet replied. “I’m Violet Baudelaire, and this is my brother, Klaus, and my sister, Sunny, and the reason why we—”

“Shush,” one of the other old men said. “We’re not discussing you right now. Rule #492 clearly states that the Council of Elders will only discuss things that are on the platform. Right now we are discussing our new Chief of Police. Are there any questions from the townspeople regarding Officer Luciana?”

“Yes, I have a question,” called out a man in plaid pants. “I want to know what happened to our previous Chief of Police. I liked that guy.”

The woman on the platform held up a white-gloved hand, and the Baudelaires turned to look at her for the first time. Officer Luciana was a very tall woman wearing big black boots, a blue coat with a shiny badge, and a motorcycle helmet with the visor pulled down to cover her eyes. The Baudelaires could see her mouth, below the edge of the visor, covered in bright red lipstick. “The previous Chief of Police has a sore throat,” she said, turning her helmet to the man who had asked the question. “He accidentally swallowed a box of thumbtacks. But let’s not waste time talking about him. I am your new Chief of Police, and I will make sure that any rulebreakers in town are punished properly. I can’t see how there’s anything more to discuss.”

“I quite agree with you,” said the first Elder who had spoken, as the people in folding chairs nodded. “The Council of Elders hereby ends the discussion of Officer Luciana. Hector, please bring the orphans to the platform for discussion.”

A tall skinny man in rumpled overalls stood up from one of the folding chairs as the Chief of Police stepped off the platform with a lipsticked smile on. His eyes on the floor, the man walked over to the Baudelaires and pointed first at the Council of Elders sitting on the bench and then at the empty platform. Although they would have preferred a more polite method of communication, the children understood at once, and Violet and Klaus stepped up onto the platform and then lifted Sunny up to join them.

One of the women in the Council of Elders spoke up. “We are now discussing the guardianship of the Baudelaire orphans. Under the new government program, the entire town of V.F.D. will act as guardian over these three children because it takes a village to raise a child. Are there any questions?”

“Are these the same Baudelaires,” came a voice from the back of the room, “who are involved in the kidnapping of the Quagmire twins by Count Omar?”

The Baudelaires turned around to see a woman dressed in a bright pink bathrobe and holding up a copy of *The Daily Punctilio*. “It says here in the newspaper that an evil count is coming after those children. I don’t want someone like that in our town!”

“We’ve taken care of that matter, Mrs. Morrow,” replied another member of the Council soothingly. “We’ll explain in a moment. Now, when children have a guardian, the guardian makes them do chores, so it follows that you Baudelaires will do all the chores for the entire village. Beginning tomorrow, you three children will be responsible for anything that anyone asks you to do.”

The children looked at each other in disbelief. “Begging your pardon,” Klaus said timidly, “but there are only twenty-four hours in a day, and there appear to be several hundred townspeople. How will we find the time to do everyone’s chores?”

“Hush!” several members of the Council said in unison, and then the youngest-looking woman spoke up. “Rule #920 clearly states that no one may talk while on the platform unless you are a police officer. You’re orphans, not police officers, so shut up. Now, due to the V.F.D. crows, you will have to arrange your chore schedule as follows: In the morning, the crows roost uptown, so that’s when you will do all the downtown chores, so the crows don’t get in your way. In the afternoon, as you can see, the crows roost downtown, so you will do the uptown chores then. Please pay particular attention to our new fountain, which was just installed this morning. It’s very beautiful, and needs to be kept as clean as possible. At night, the crows roost in Nevermore Tree, which is on the outskirts of town, so there’s no problem there. Are there any questions?”

“I have a question,” said the man in plaid pants. He stood up from his folding chair and pointed at the Baudelaires. “Where are they going to live? It may take a village to raise a child, but that doesn’t mean that our homes have to be disturbed by noisy children, does it?”

“Yes,” agreed Mrs. Morrow. “I’m all for the orphans doing our chores, but I don’t want them cluttering up my house.”

Several other townspeople spoke up. “Hear, hear!” they said, using an expression which here means “I don’t want Violet, Klaus, and Sunny Baudelaire to live with me, either!”

One of the oldest-looking Elders raised both his hands up in the air. “Please,” he said. “There is no reason for all this fuss. The children will live with Hector, our handyman. He will feed them, clothe them, and make sure they do all the chores, and he is responsible for teaching them all of the rules of V.F.D., so they won’t do any more terrible things, such as talking while on the platform.”

“Thank goodness for that,” muttered the man in plaid pants.

“Now, Baudelaires,” said yet another member of the Council. She was sitting so far from the platform that she had to crane her head to look at the children, and her hat looked like it would fall off her head. “Before Hector takes you to his house, I’m sure you have some concerns of your own. It’s too bad you’re not allowed to speak right now, otherwise you could tell us what they were. But Mr. Poe sent us some materials regarding this Count Olaf person.”

“Omar,” corrected Mrs. Morrow, pointing to the headline in the newspaper.

“Silence!” the Elder said. “Now, Baudelaires, I’m sure you are very concerned about this Olaf fellow, but as your guardian, the town will protect you. That is why we have recently made up a new rule, Rule #19,833. It clearly states that no villains are allowed within the city limits.”

“Hear, hear!” the townspeople cried, and the Council of Elders nodded in appreciation, bobbing their crow-shaped hats.

“Now, if there are no more questions,” an Elder concluded, “Hector, please take the Baudelaires off the platform and take them to your house.”

Still keeping his eyes on the floor, the man in overalls strode silently to the platform and led them out of the room. The children hurried to catch up with the handyman, who had not said one word all this time. Was he unhappy to be taking care of three children? Was he angry at the Council of Elders? Was he unable to speak at all? It reminded the Baudelaires of one of Count Olaf's associates, the one who looked like neither a man nor a woman and who never seemed to speak. The children kept a few steps behind Hector as he walked out of the building, almost afraid to get any closer to a man who was so strange and silent.

When Hector opened the door of Town Hall and led the children back out onto the crow-covered sidewalk, he let out a big sigh—the first sound the children had heard from him. Then he looked down at each Baudelaire and gave them a gentle smile. "I'm never truly relaxed," he said to them in a pleasant voice, "until I have left Town Hall. The Council of Elders makes me feel very skittish. All those strict rules! It make me so skittish that I never speak during one of their council meetings. But I always feel much better the moment I walk out of the building. Now, it looks like we're going to be spending quite a bit of time together, so let's get a few things straight. Number one, call me Hector. Number two, I hope you like Mexican food, because that's my specialty. And number three, I want you to see something marvelous, and we're just in time. The sun is starting to set."

It was true. The Baudelaires hadn't noticed, when they stepped out of Town Hall, that the afternoon light had slipped away and that the sun was now just beginning to dip below the horizon. "It's lovely," Violet said politely, although she had never understood all the fuss about standing around admiring sunsets.

"Shh," Hector said. "Who cares about the sunset? Just be quiet for a minute, and watch the crows. It should happen any second now."

"What should happen?" Klaus said.

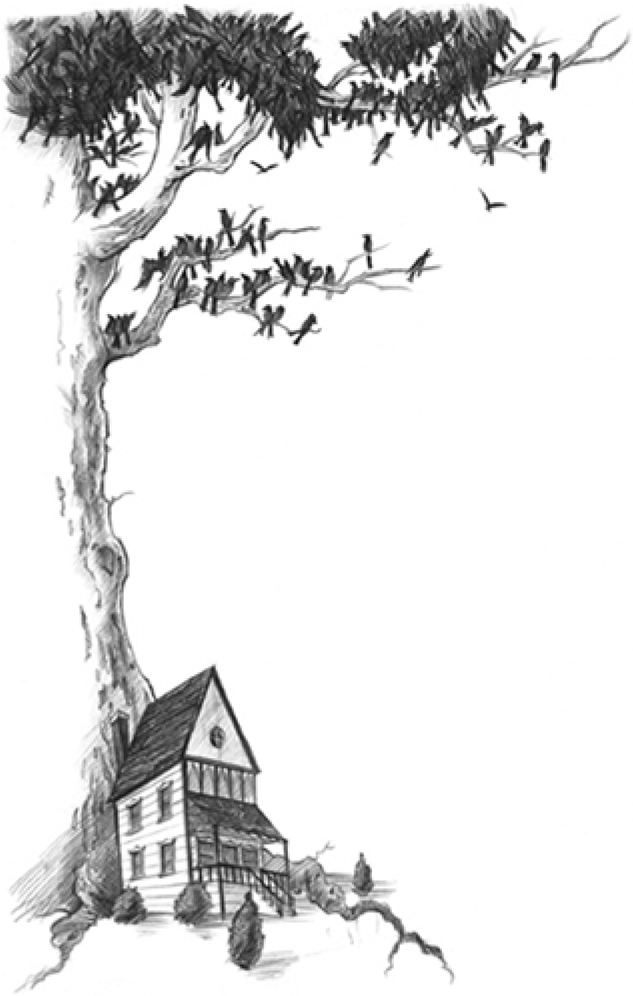
"Shh," Hector said again, and then it began to happen. The Council of Elders had already told the Baudelaires about the roosting habits of the crows, but the three children hadn't really given the matter a second thought, a phrase which here means "considered, even for a second, what it would look like when thousands of crows would fly together to a new location." One of the largest crows, sitting on top of the mailbox, was the first to fly up in the air, and with a rustle of wings he—or she; it was hard to tell from so far away—began to fly in a large circle over the children's heads. Then a crow from one of Town Hall's windowsills flew up to join the first crow, and then one from a nearby bush, and then three from the street, and then hundreds of crows began to rise up at once and circle in the air, and it was as if an enormous shadow was being lifted from the town. The Baudelaires could finally see what all the streets looked like, and they could gaze at each detail of the buildings as more and more crows left their afternoon roosts. But the children scarcely looked at the town. Instead they looked straight up, at the mysterious and beautiful sight of all those birds making a huge circle in the sky.

"Isn't it marvelous?" Hector cried. His long skinny arms were outstretched, and he had to raise his voice over the sound of all the fluttering wings. "Isn't it marvelous?"

Violet, Klaus, and Sunny nodded in agreement, and stared at the thousands of crows circling and circling above them like a mass of fluttering smoke or like black, fresh ink—such as the ink I am using now, to write down these events—that somehow had found its way to the heavens. The sound of the wings sounded like a million pages being flipped, and the wind from all that fluttering blew in their grinning faces. For a moment, with all that air rushing toward them, the Baudelaire orphans felt as if they too could fly up into the air, away from Count Olaf and all their troubles, and join the circle of crows in the evening sky.

CHAPTER
Three

“*Wasn’t* that marvelous?” Hector said, as the crows stopped circling and began to fly, like an enormous black cloud, over the buildings and away from the Baudelaire orphans. “Wasn’t that just marvelous? Wasn’t that absolutely superlative? That means the same thing as ‘marvelous,’ by the way.”



"It certainly was," Klaus agreed, not adding that he had known the word "superlative" since he was eleven. "I see that just about every evening," Hector said, "and it always impresses me. It always makes me hungry, too. What shall we eat this evening? How about chicken enchiladas? That's a Mexican dish consisting of corn tortillas rolled around a chicken filling, covered with melted cheese and a special sauce I learned from my second-grade teacher. How does that sound?"

"That sounds delicious," Violet said.

"Oh, good," Hector said. "I despise picky eaters. Well, it's a pretty long walk to my house, so let's talk as we go. Here, I'll carry your suitcases and you two can carry your sister. I know you had to walk from the bus stop, so she's had more than enough exercise for a baby."

Hector grabbed the Baudelaires’ bags and led the way down the street, which was now empty except for a few stray crow feathers. High above their heads, the crows were taking a sharp left-hand turn, and Hector raised Klaus’s suitcase to point at them. “I don’t know if you’re familiar with the expression ‘as the crow flies,’” Hector said, “but it means ‘the most direct route.’ If something is a mile away as the crow flies, that means it’s the shortest way to get there. It usually has nothing to do with actual crows, but in this case it does. We’re about a mile away from my home as the crow flies—as all those crows fly, as a matter of fact. At night, they roost in Nevermore Tree, which is in my backyard. But it takes us longer to get there, of course, because we have to walk through V.F.D. instead of flying up in the air.”

“Hector,” Violet said timidly, “we were wondering exactly what V.F.D. stands for.”

“Oh yes,” Klaus said. “Please tell us.”

“Of course I’ll tell you,” Hector said, “but I don’t know why you’re so excited about it. It’s just more nonsense from the Council of Elders.”

The Baudelaires looked at one another uncertainly. “What do you mean?” Klaus asked.

“Well, about three hundred and six years ago,” Hector said, “a group of explorers discovered the murder of crows that we just saw.”

“Sturo?” Sunny asked.

“We didn’t see any crows get killed,” Violet said.

“‘Murder’ is the word for a group of crows, like a flock of geese or a herd of cows or a convention of orthodontists. Anyway, the explorers were impressed with their patterns of migration—you know, they always fly uptown in the morning, downtown in the afternoon and over to Nevermore Tree in the evening. It’s a very unusual pattern, and the explorers were so excited by it that they decided to live here. Before too long, a town sprung up, and so they named it V.F.D.”

“But what does V.F.D. stand for?” Violet asked.

“The Village of Fowl Devotees,” Hector said. “‘Devotees’ is a word for people who are devoted to something, and ‘fowl’—”

“—means ‘bird,’” Klaus finished. “That’s the secret of V.F.D.? Village of Fowl Devotees?”

“What do you mean, secret?” Hector asked. “It’s not a secret. Everyone knows what those letters mean.”

The Baudelaires sighed with confusion and dismay, which is not a pleasant combination. “What my brother means,” Violet explained, “is that we chose V.F.D. to become our new guardian because we’d been told of a terrible secret—a secret with the initials V.F.D.”

“Who told you about this secret?” Hector asked.

“Some very dear friends of ours,” Violet replied. “Duncan and Isadora Quagmire. They discovered something about Count Olaf, but before they could tell us anything more—”

“Hold on a minute,” Hector said. “Who’s Count Olaf? Mrs. Morrow was talking about Count *Omar*. Is Olaf his brother?”

“No,” Klaus said, shuddering at the very thought of Olaf having a brother. “I’m afraid *The Daily Punctilio* got many of the facts wrong.”

“Well, why don’t we get them right,” Hector said, turning a corner. “Suppose you tell me exactly what happened.”

“It’s sort of a long story,” Violet said.

“Well,” Hector said, with a slight smile, “we have sort of a long walk. Why don’t you begin at the beginning?”

The Baudelaires looked up at Hector, sighed, and began at the beginning, which seemed such a long way off that they were surprised they could remember it so clearly. Violet told Hector about the dreadful day at the beach when she and her siblings learned from Mr. Poe that their parents had been killed in the fire that had destroyed their home, and Klaus told Hector about the days they spent in Count Olaf's care. Sunny—with some help from Klaus and Violet, who translated for her—told him about poor Uncle Monty, and about the terrible things that had happened to Aunt Josephine. Violet told Hector about working at Lucky Smells Lumbermill, and Klaus told him about enrolling at Prufrock Preparatory School, and Sunny related the dismal time they had living with Jerome and Esmé Squalor at 667 Dark Avenue. Violet told Hector all about Count Olaf's various disguises, and about each and every one of his nefarious associates, including the hook-handed man, the two powder-faced women, the bald man with the long nose, and the one who looked like neither a man nor a woman, of whom the Baudelaires had been reminded when Hector had been so silent. Klaus told Hector all about the Quagmire triplets, and about the mysterious underground passageway that had led back to their home, and about the shadow of misfortune that had seemed to hang over them nearly every moment since that day at the beach. And as the Baudelaires told Hector their long story, they began to feel as if the handyman was carrying more than their suitcases. They felt as if he was carrying each word they said, as if each unfortunate event was a burden that Hector was helping them with. The story of their lives was so miserable that I cannot say they felt happy when they were through telling it, but by the time Sunny concluded the whole long story, the Baudelaires felt as if they were carrying much less.

"Kyun," Sunny concluded, which Violet was quick to translate as "And that's why we chose this town, in the hopes of finding the secret of V.F.D., rescuing the Quagmire triplets, and defeating Count Olaf once and for all."

Hector sighed. "You've certainly been through an ordeal," he said, using a word which here means "a heap of trouble, most of which was Count Olaf's fault." He stopped for a second and looked at each Baudelaire. "You've been very brave, all three of you, and I'll do my best to make sure you have a proper home with me. But I must tell you that I think you've hit a dead end."

"What do you mean?" Klaus asked.

“Well, I hate to add some bad news to the terrible story you just told me,” Hector said, “but I think the initials that the Quagmires told you about and the initials of this town are just a coincidence. As I said, this village has been called V.F.D. for more than three hundred years. Scarcely anything has changed since then. The crows have always roosted in the same places. The meetings of the Council of Elders have always been at the same time every day. My father was the handyman before me, and his father was the handyman before him, and so on and so on. The only new things in this town are you three children and the new Fowl Fountain uptown, which we’ll be cleaning tomorrow. I don’t see how this village could have anything to do with the secret the Quagmires discovered.”

The Baudelaire children looked at one another in frustration. “Pojik?” Sunny asked in exasperation. She meant something along the lines of “Do you mean we’ve come here for nothing?” but Violet translated it somewhat differently.

“What my sister means,” Violet said, “is that it’s very frustrating to find that we’re in the wrong place.”

“We’re very concerned for our friends,” Klaus added, “and we don’t want to give up on finding them.”

“Give up?” Hector said. “Who said anything about giving up? Just because the name of this town isn’t helpful, that doesn’t mean you’re in the wrong place. We obviously have a great many chores to do, but in our spare time we can try to find out the whereabouts of Duncan and Isadora. I’m a handyman, not a detective, but I’ll try to help you the best I can. We’ll have to be very careful, though. The Council of Elders has so many rules that you can scarcely do anything without breaking one of them.”

“Why does the Council have so many rules?” Violet asked.

“Why does anyone have a lot of rules?” Hector said with a shrug. “So they can boss people around, I guess. Thanks to all the rules of V.F.D., the Council of Elders can tell people what to wear, how to talk, what to eat, and even what to build. Rule #67, for instance, clearly states that no citizen is allowed to build or use any mechanical devices.”

“Does that mean I can’t build or use any mechanical devices?” Violet asked Hector. “Are my siblings and I citizens of V.F.D., now that the town is our guardian?”

“I’m afraid you are,” Hector said. “You have to follow Rule #67, along with all the other rules.”

“But Violet’s an inventor!” Klaus cried. “Mechanical devices are very important to her!”

“Is that so?” Hector said, and smiled. “Then you can be a very big help to me, Violet.” He stopped walking, and looked around the street as if it was full of spies, instead of being completely empty. “Can you keep a secret?” he asked.

“Yes,” Violet answered.

Hector looked around the street once more, and then leaned forward and began speaking in a very quiet voice. “When the Council of Elders invented Rule #67,” he said, “they instructed me to remove all the inventing materials in town.”

“What did you say?” Klaus asked.

“I didn’t say anything,” Hector admitted, leading the children around another corner. “The Council makes me too skittish to speak; you know that. But here’s what I did. I took all of the materials and hid them out in my barn, which I’ve been using as sort of an inventing studio.”

“I’ve always wanted to have an inventing studio,” Violet said. Without even realizing it, she was reaching into her pocket for a ribbon, to tie her hair up and keep it out of her eyes, as if she were already inventing something instead of just talking about it. “What have you invented so far, Hector?”

“Oh, just a few little things,” Hector said, “but I have an enormous project that is nearing completion. I’ve been building a self-sustaining hot air mobile home.”

“Neebdes?” Sunny said. She meant something like, “Could you explain that a bit more?” but Hector needed no encouragement to keep talking about his invention.

“I don’t know if you’ve ever been up in a hot air balloon,” he said, “but it’s very exciting. You stand in a large basket, with the enormous balloon over your head, and you can gaze down at the entire countryside below you, spread out like a blanket. It’s simply superlative. Well, my invention is nothing more than a hot air balloon—except it’s much larger. Instead of one large basket, there are twelve baskets, all tied together below several hot air balloons. Each basket serves as a different room, so it’s like having an entire flying house. It’s completely self-sustaining—once you get up in it, you never have to go back down. In fact, if my new engine works properly, it will be impossible to get back down. The engine should last for more than one hundred years, and there’s a huge storage basket that I’m filling with food, beverages, clothing, and books. Once it’s completed, I’ll be able to fly away from V.F.D. and the Council of Elders and everything else that makes me skittish, and live forever in the air.”

“It sounds like a marvelous invention,” Violet said. “How in the world have you been able to get the engine to be self-sustaining, too?”

“That’s giving me something of a problem,” Hector admitted, “but maybe if you three took a look at it, we could fix the engine together.”

“I’m sure Violet could be of help,” Klaus said, “but I’m not much of an inventor. I’m more interested in reading. Does V.F.D. have a good library?”

“Unfortunately, no,” Hector said. “Rule #108 clearly states that the V.F.D. library cannot contain any books that break any of the other rules. If someone in a book uses a mechanical device, for instance, that book is not allowed in the library.”

“But there are so many rules,” Klaus said. “What kind of books could possibly be allowed?”

“Not very many,” Hector said, “and nearly all of them are dull. There’s one called *The Littlest Elf* that’s probably the most boring book ever written. It’s about this irritating little man who has all sorts of tedious adventures.”

“That’s too bad,” Klaus said glumly. “I was hoping that I could do a little research into V.F.D.—the secret, that is, not the village—in my spare time.”

Hector stopped walking again, and looked once more around the empty streets. “Can you keep another secret?” he asked, and the Baudelaires nodded. “The Council of Elders told me to burn all of the books that broke Rule #108,” he said in a quiet voice, “but I brought them to my barn instead. I have sort of a secret library there, as well as a secret inventing studio.”

“Wow,” Klaus said. “I’ve seen public libraries, private libraries, school libraries, legal libraries, reptile libraries, and grammatical libraries, but never a secret library. It sounds exciting.”

“It’s a bit exciting,” Hector agreed, “but it also makes me very skittish. The Council of Elders gets very, very angry when people break the rules. I hate to think what they’d do to me if they found out I was secretly using mechanical devices and reading interesting books.”

“Azzator!” Sunny said, which meant “Don’t worry—your secret is safe with us!”

Hector looked down at her quizzically. “I don’t know what ‘azzator’ means, Sunny,” he said, “but I would guess it means ‘Don’t forget about me!’ Violet will use the studio, and Klaus will use the library, but what can we do for you? What do you like to do best?”

“Bite!” Sunny responded at once, but Hector frowned and took another look around him.

“Don’t say that so loudly, Sunny!” he whispered. “Rule #4,561 clearly states that citizens are not allowed to use their mouths for recreation. If the Council of Elders knew that you liked to bite things for your own enjoyment, I can’t imagine what they’d do. I’m sure we can find you some things to bite, but you’ll have to do it in secret. Well, here we are.”

Hector led the Baudelaires around one last corner, and the children got their first glimpse of where they would be living. The street they had been walking on simply ended at the turn of the corner, leading them to a place as wide and as flat as the countryside they had crossed that afternoon, with just three shapes standing out on the flat horizon. The first was a large, sturdy-looking house, with a pointed roof and a front porch big enough to contain a picnic table and four wooden chairs. The second was an enormous barn, right next to the house, that hid the studio and library Hector had been talking about. But it was the third shape that caused the Baudelaires to stare.

The third shape on the horizon was Nevermore Tree, but to simply say it was a tree would be like saying the Pacific Ocean was a body of water, or that Count Olaf was a grumpy person or that the story of Beatrice and myself was just a little bit sad. Nevermore Tree was gargantuan, a word which here means “having attained an inordinate amount of botanical volume,” a phrase which here means “it was the biggest tree the Baudelaires had ever seen.” Its trunk was so wide that the Baudelaires could have stood behind it, along with an elephant, three horses, and an opera singer, and not have been seen from the other side. Its branches spread out in every direction, like a fan that was taller than the house and wider than the barn, and the tree was made even taller and wider by what was sitting in it. Every last V.F.D. crow was roosting in its branches, adding a thick layer of muttering black shapes to the immense silhouette of the tree. Because the crows had gotten to Hector’s house as the crow flies, instead of walking, the birds had arrived long before the Baudelaires, and the air was filled with the quiet rustling sounds of the birds settling in for the evening. A few of the birds had already fallen asleep, and the children could hear a few crow snores as they approached their new home.

“What do you think?” Hector asked.

“It’s marvelous,” Violet said.

“It’s superlative,” Klaus said.

“Ogufod!” Sunny said, which meant “What a lot of crows!”

“The noises of the crows might sound strange at first,” Hector said, leading the way up the steps of the house, “but you’ll get used to them before long. I always leave the windows open when I go to bed. The sounds of the crows remind me of the ocean, and I find it very peaceful to listen to them as I drift off to sleep. Speaking of bed, I’m sure you must be very tired. I’ve prepared three rooms for you upstairs, but if you don’t like them you can choose other ones. There’s plenty of room in the house. There’s even room for the Quagmires to live here, when we find them. It sounds like the five of you would be happy living together, even if you had to do the chores of an entire town.”

“That sounds delightful,” Violet said, smiling at Hector. It made the children happy just to think of the two triplets being safe and sound, instead of in Count Olaf’s clutches. “Duncan is a journalist, so maybe he could start a newspaper—then V.F.D. wouldn’t have to read all of the mistakes in *The Daily Punctilio*.”

“And Isadora is a poet,” Klaus said. “She could write a book of poetry for the library—as long as she didn’t write poetry about things that were against the rules.”

Hector started to open the door of his house, but then paused and gave the Baudelaires a strange look. “A poet?” he asked. “What kind of poetry does she write?”

“Couplets,” Violet replied.

Hector gave the children a look that was even stranger. He put down the Baudelaires’ suitcases and reached into the pocket of his overalls. “Couplets?” he asked.

“Yes,” Klaus said. “She likes to write rhyming poems that are two lines long.”

Hector gave the youngsters a look that was one of the strangest they had ever seen, and took his hand out of his pocket to show them a scrap of paper rolled into a tiny scroll. “Like this?” he asked, and unrolled the paper. The Baudelaire orphans had to squint to read it in the dying light of the sunset, and when they read it once they had to read it again, to make sure that the light wasn’t playing tricks on them and that they had read what was really there on the scrap of paper, in shaky but familiar handwriting:

> *For sapphires we are held in here.*
> *Only you can end our fear*.

CHAPTER
Four

For Sapphire
End Our Fear

The Baudelaire orphans stared at the scrap of paper, and then at Hector, and then at the scrap of paper again. Then they stared at Hector again, and then at the scrap of paper once more and then at Hector once more and then at the scrap of paper once again, and then at Hector once again and then at the scrap of paper one more time. Their mouths were open as if they were about to speak, but the three children could not find the words they wanted to say.

The expression "a bolt from the blue" describes something so surprising that it makes your head spin, your legs wobble, and your body buzz with astonishment—as if a bolt of lightning suddenly came down from a clear blue sky and struck you at full force. Unless you are a lightbulb, an electrical appliance, or a tree that is tired of standing upright, encountering a bolt from the blue is not a pleasant experience, and for a few minutes the Baudelaires stood on the steps of Hector's house and felt the unpleasant sensations of spinning heads, wobbly legs, and buzzing bodies.

"My goodness, Baudelaires," Hector said. "I've never seen anyone look so surprised. Here, come in the house and sit down. You look like a bolt of lightning just hit you at full force."

The Baudelaires followed Hector into his house and down a hallway to the parlor, where they sat down on a couch without a word. "Why don't you sit here for a few minutes," he said. "I'm going to fix you some hot tea. Maybe by the time it's ready you'll be able to talk." He leaned down and handed the scrap of paper to Violet, and gave Sunny a little pat on the head before walking out of the parlor and leaving the children alone. Without speaking, Violet unrolled the paper so the siblings could read the couplet again.

For sapphires we are held in here.
Only you can end our fear.

“It’s her,” Klaus said, speaking quietly so Hector wouldn’t hear him. “I’m sure of it. Isadora Quagmire wrote this poem.”

“I think so, too,” Violet said. “I’m positive it’s her handwriting.”

“Blake!” Sunny said, which meant “And the poem is written in Isadora’s distinct literary style!”

“The poem talks about sapphires,” Violet said, “and the triplets’ parents left behind the famous Quagmire sapphires when they died.”

“Olaf kidnapped them to get ahold of those sapphires,” Klaus said. “That must be what it means when it says ‘For sapphires we are held in here.’”

“Peng?” Sunny asked.

“I don’t know how Hector got ahold of this,” Violet replied. “Let’s ask him.”

“Not so fast,” Klaus said. He took the poem from Violet and looked at it again. “Maybe Hector’s involved with the kidnapping in some way.”

“I hadn’t thought of that,” Violet said. “Do you really think so?”

“I don’t know,” Klaus said. “He doesn’t seem like one of Count Olaf’s associates, but sometimes we haven’t been able to recognize them.”

“Wryb,” Sunny said thoughtfully, which meant “That’s true.”

“He seems like someone we can trust,” Violet said. “He was excited to show us the migration of the crows, and he wanted to hear all about everything that has happened to us. That doesn’t sound like a kidnapper, but I suppose there’s no way of knowing for sure.”

“Exactly,” Klaus said. “There’s no way of knowing for sure.”

“The tea’s all ready,” Hector called from the next room. “If you’re up to it, why don’t you join me in the kitchen? You can sit at the table while I make the enchiladas.”

The Baudelaires looked at one another, and nodded. “Kay!” Sunny called, and led her siblings into a large and cozy kitchen. The children took seats at a round wooden table, where Hector had placed three steaming mugs of tea, and sat quietly while Hector began to prepare dinner. It is true, of course, that there is no way of knowing for sure whether or not you can trust someone, for the simple reason that circumstances change all of the time. You might know someone for several years, for instance, and trust him completely as your friend, but circumstances change all of the time. You might know someone for several years, for instance, and trust him completely as your friend, but circumstances could change and he could become very hungry, and before you knew it you could be boiling in a soup pot, because there is no way of knowing for sure. I myself fell in love with a wonderful woman who was so charming and intelligent that I trusted that she would be my bride, but there was no way of knowing for sure, and all too soon circumstances changed and she ended up marrying someone else, all because of something she read in *The Daily Punctilio*. And no one had to tell the Baudelaire orphans that there was no way of knowing for sure, because before they became orphans, they lived for many years in the care their parents, and trusted their parents to keep on caring for them, but circumstances changed, and now their parents were dead and the children were living with a handyman in a town full of crows. But even though there is no way of knowing for sure, there are often ways to know for pretty sure, and as the three siblings watched Hector work in the kitchen they spotted some of those ways. The tune he hummed as he chopped the ingredients, for instance, was a comforting one, and the Baudelaires could not imagine that a person could hum like that if he were a kidnapper. When he saw that the Baudelaires' tea was still too hot to sip, he walked over to the kitchen and blew on each of their mugs to cool it, and it was hard to believe that someone could be hiding two triplets and cooling three children's tea at the same time. And most comforting of all, Hector didn't pester them with a lot of questions about why they were so surprised and silent. He simply kept quiet and let the Baudelaires wait until they were ready to speak about the scrap of paper he had given them, and the children could not imagine that such a considerate person was involved with Count Olaf in any way whatsoever. There was no way of knowing for sure, of course, but as the Baudelaires watched the handyman place the enchiladas in the oven to bake, they felt as if they knew for pretty sure, and by the time he sat down and joined them at the table they were ready to tell him about the couplet they had read.

"This poem was written by Isadora Quagmire," Klaus said without preamble, a phrase which here means "almost as soon as Hector sat down."

"Wow," Hector said. "No wonder you were so surprised. But how can you be sure? Lots of poets write couplets. Ogden Nash, for instance."

"Ogden Nash doesn't write about sapphires," said Klaus, who had received a biography of Ogden Nash for his seventh birthday. "Isadora does. When the Quagmire parents died, they left behind a fortune in sapphires. That's what she means by 'For sapphires we are held in here.'"

"Besides," Violet said, "it's Isadora's handwriting and distinct literary style."

"Well," Hector said, "if you say this poem is by Isadora Quagmire, I believe you."

"We should call Mr. Poe, and tell him," Klaus said.

"We can't call him," Hector said. "There are no telephones in V.F.D., because telephones are mechanical devices. The Council of Elders can send a message to him. I'm too skittish to ask them, but you can do so if you wish."

"Well, before we talk to the Council, we should know a bit more about the couplet," Violet said. "Where did you get ahold of this scrap of paper?"

"I found it today," Hector said, "beneath the branches of Nevermore Tree. I woke up this morning, and I was just leaving to walk downtown to do the morning chores when I noticed something white among all the black feathers the crows had left behind. It was this scrap of paper, all rolled up in a little scroll. I didn't understand what was written on it, and I needed to get the chores done, so I put it in the pocket of my overalls, and I didn't think of it again until just now, when we were talking about couplets. It's certainly very mysterious. How in the world did one of Isadora's poems end up in my backyard?"

"Well, poems don't get up and walk by themselves," Violet said. "Isadora must have put it here. She must be someplace nearby."

Hector shook his head. "I don't think so," he said. "You saw for yourself how flat it is around here. You can see everything for miles around, and the only things here on the outskirts of town are the house, the barn, and Nevermore Tree. You're welcome to search the house, but you're not going to find Isadora Quagmire or anyone else, and I always keep the barn locked because I don't want the Council of Elders to find out I'm breaking the rules."

"Maybe she's in the tree," Klaus said. "It's certainly big enough that Olaf could hide her in the branches."

"That's true," Violet said. "Last time Olaf was keeping them far below us. Maybe this time they're far above us." She shuddered, thinking of how unpleasant it would be to find yourself trapped in Nevermore Tree's enormous branches, and she pushed her chair back from the table and stood up. "There's only one thing to do," she said. "We'll have to go up and look for them."

"You're right," Klaus said, and stood up beside her. "Let's go."

"Gerhit!" Sunny agreed.

“Hold on a minute,” Hector said. “We can’t just go climbing up Nevermore Tree.”

“Why not?” Violet said. “We’ve climbed up a tower and down an elevator shaft. Climbing a tree should be no problem.”

“I’m sure you three are fine climbers,” Hector said, “but that’s not what I mean.” He stood up and walked over to the kitchen window. “Take a look outside,” he said. “The sun has completely set. It’s not light enough to see a friend of yours up in Nevermore Tree. Besides, the tree is covered in roosting birds. You’ll never be able to climb through all of those crows—it’ll be a wild-goose chase.”

The Baudelaires looked out the window and saw that Hector was right. The tree was merely an enormous shadow, blurry around the edges where the birds were roosting. The children knew that a climb in such darkness would indeed be a wild-goose chase, a phrase which here means “unlikely to reveal the Quagmires triplets’ location.” Klaus and Sunny looked at their sister, hoping that she could invent a solution, and were relieved to hear she had thought of something before she could even tie her hair back in a ribbon. “We could climb with flashlights,” Violet said. “If you have some tinfoil, an old broom handle, and three rubber bands, I can make a flashlight myself in ten minutes.”

Hector shook his head. “Flashlights would only disturb the crows,” he said. “If someone woke you up in the middle of the night and shone a light in your face, you would be very annoyed, and you don’t want to be surrounded by thousands of annoyed crows. It’s better to wait until morning, when the crows have migrated uptown.”

“We can’t wait until morning,” Klaus said. “We can’t wait another second. The last time we found them, we left them alone for a few minutes, and then they were gone again.”

“Ollawmove!” Sunny shrieked, which meant “Olaf could move them at any time!”

“Well, he can’t move them now,” Hector pointed out. “It would be just as difficult for him to climb the tree.”

“We have to do something,” Violet insisted. “This poem isn’t just a couplet—it’s a cry for help. Isadora herself says ‘Only you can end our fear.’ Our friends are frightened, and it’s up to us to rescue them.”

Hector took some oven mitts out of the pocket of his overalls, and used them to take the enchiladas out of the oven. “I’ll tell you what,” he said. “It’s a nice evening, and our chicken enchiladas are done. We can sit out on the porch, and eat our dinner, and keep an eye on Nevermore Tree. This area is so flat that even at night you can see for quite a distance, and if Count Olaf approaches—or anybody else, for that matter—we’ll see him coming.”

“But Count Olaf might perform his treachery after dinner,” Klaus said. “The only way to make sure that nobody approaches the tree is to watch the tree all night.”

“We can take turns sleeping,” Violet said, “so that one of us is always awake to keep watch.”

Hector started to shake his head, but then stopped and looked at the children. “Normally I don’t approve of children staying up late,” he said finally, “unless they are reading a very good book, seeing a wonderful movie, or attending a dinner party with fascinating guests. But this time I suppose we can make an exception. I’ll probably fall asleep, but you three can keep watch all night if you wish. Just please don’t try to climb Nevermore Tree in the dark. I understand how frustrated you are, and I know that the only thing we can do is wait until morning.”

The Baudelaires looked at one another and sighed. They were so anxious about the Quagmires that they wanted to run right out and climb Nevermore Tree, but they knew in their hearts that Hector was right.

“I guess you’re right, Hector,” Violet said. “We can wait until morning.”

“It’s the only thing we can do,” Klaus agreed.

“Contraire!” Sunny said, and held up her arms so that Klaus could pick her up. She meant something along the lines of “I can think of something else we can do—hold me up to the window latch!” and her brother did so. Sunny’s tiny fingers undid the latch of the window and pushed it open, letting in the cool evening air and the muttering sound of the crows. Then she leaned forward as far as she could and stuck her head out into the night. “Bark!” she cried out as loudly as she could. “Bark!”

There are many expressions to describe someone who is going about something in the wrong way. “Making a mistake” is one way to describe this situation. “Screwing up” is another, although it is a bit rude, and “Attempting to rescue Lemony Snicket by writing letters to a congressman, instead of digging an escape tunnel” is a third way, although it is a bit too specific. But Sunny calling out “Bark!” brings to mind an expression that, sadly enough, describes the situation perfectly.

By “Bark!” Sunny meant “If you’re up there, Quagmires, just hang on, and we’ll get you out first thing in the morning,” and I’m sorry to say that the expression which best describes her circumstances is “barking up the wrong tree.” It was a kind gesture of Sunny’s, to try to reassure Isadora and Duncan that the Baudelaires would help them escape from Count Olaf’s clutches, but the youngest Baudelaire was going about it the wrong way. “Bark!” she cried one more time, as Hector began to dish up the chicken enchiladas, and led the Baudelaires to the front porch so they could eat at the picnic table and keep an eye on Nevermore Tree, but Sunny was making a mistake. The Baudelaires did not realize the mistake as they finished their dinner and kept their eye on the immense, muttering tree. They did not realize the mistake as they sat on the porch for the rest of the night, taking turns at squinting at the flat horizon for any sign of someone approaching and dozing beside Hector using the picnic table as a pillow. But when the sun began to rise, and one V.F.D. crow left Nevermore Tree and began to fly in a circle, and three more crows followed, and then seven more, and then twelve more, and soon the morning sky was filled with the sound of fluttering wings as the thousands of crows circled and circled above the children’s heads as they rose from the wooden chairs and walked quickly toward the tree to look for any sign of the Quagmires, the Baudelaires saw at once how deeply mistaken they had been.

Without the murder of crows roosting in its branches, Nevermore Tree looked as bare as a skeleton. There was not a single leaf among the hundreds and hundreds of the tree’s branches. Standing on its scraggly roots and looking up into the empty branches, the Baudelaires could see every last detail of Nevermore Tree, and they could see at once that they would not find Duncan and Isadora Quagmire no matter how far they climbed. It was an enormous tree, and it was a sturdy tree, and it was apparently very comfortable to roost in, but it was the wrong tree. Klaus had been barking up the wrong tree when he’d said that their kidnapped friends were probably up there, and Violet had been barking up the wrong tree when she’d said that they should climb up and look for them, and Sunny had been barking up the wrong tree when she’d said “Bark!” The Baudelaire orphans had been barking up the wrong tree all evening, because the only thing the children found that morning was another scrap of paper, rolled into a scroll, among all the black feathers that the crows had left behind.

CHAPTER
Five

Until dawn comes we cannot speak.
No words can come from this sad beak.

“*My* head is spinning again,” Violet said, holding the scrap of paper so Klaus and Sunny could see what was written on it. “And my legs are all wobbly and my body is buzzing, like I’ve been struck by lightning. How in the world did Isadora get another poem here? We made sure that one of us was watching the tree at every moment.”

“Maybe it was here yesterday, but Hector didn’t see it,” Klaus said.

Violet shook her head. “A white scrap of paper is very easy to see next to all these black feathers. It must have arrived here sometime in the night. But how?”

“How it got here is the least of our questions,” Klaus said. “Where are the Quagmires? That’s the question I want answered.”

“But why doesn’t Isadora just tell us,” Violet said, rereading the couplet and frowning, “instead of leaving us mysterious poems on the ground where anyone could find them?”

“Maybe that’s why,” Klaus said slowly. “Anyone could find them here on the ground. If Isadora simply wrote out where they were, and Count Olaf found the scrap of paper, he’d move them—or worse. I’m not that experienced with reading poetry, but I bet Isadora *is* telling us where she and her brother are. It must be hidden somewhere in the poem.”

“It’ll be difficult to find,” Violet said, rereading the couplet. “There are so many confusing things about this poem. Why does she say ‘beak’? Isadora has a nose and mouth, not a beak.”

“Cra!” Sunny said, which meant “She probably means the beak of a V.F.D. crow.”

“You might be right,” Violet agreed. “But why does she say that no words can come from it? Of course no words can come from a beak. Birds can’t talk.”

“Actually, some birds can talk,” Klaus said. “I read an ornithological encyclopedia that discussed the parrot and the myna bird, which both can imitate human speech.”

“But there aren’t any parrots or myna birds around here,” Violet said. “There are only crows, and crows certainly can’t speak.”

“And speaking of speaking,” Klaus said, “why does the poem say ‘Until dawn comes we cannot speak’?”

“Well, both these poems arrived in the morning,” Violet said. “Maybe Isadora means that she can only send us poems in the morning.”

“None of this makes any sense,” Klaus said. “Maybe Hector can help us figure out what’s going wrong.”

“Laper!” Sunny said in agreement, and the children went to wake up the handyman, who was still asleep on the front porch. Violet touched his shoulder, and as he yawned and sat up the children could see that his face had lines on it from sleeping on the picnic table.

“Good morning, Baudelaires,” he said, stretching his arms and giving them a sleepy smile. “At least, I hope it’s a good morning. Did you find any sign of the Quagmires?”

“It’s more like a strange morning,” Violet replied. “We found a sign of them, all right. Take a look.”

Violet handed Hector the second poem, and he read it and frowned. “‘Curiouser and curiouser,’” he said, quoting one of the Baudelaires’ favorite books. “This is really turning into a puzzle.”

“But a puzzle is just something you do for amusement,” Klaus said. “Duncan and Isadora are in grave danger. If we don’t figure out what these poems are trying to tell us, Count Olaf will—”

“Don’t even say it,” Violet said with a shiver. “We absolutely must solve this puzzle, and that is that.”

Hector stood up to stretch, and looked out on the flat and empty horizon surrounding his home. “Judging by the angle of the sun,” he said, “it’s just about time to leave. We don’t even have time for breakfast.”

“Leave?” Violet asked.

“Of course,” Hector said. “Are you forgetting how many chores we have ahead of us today?” He reached into the pocket of his overalls and pulled out a list. “We begin downtown, of course, so the crows don’t get in our way. We have to trim Mrs. Morrow’s hedges, wash Mr. Lesko’s windows, and polish all the doorknobs at the Verhoogen family’s mansion. Plus we have to sweep all the feathers out of the street, and take out everyone’s garbage and recyclables.”

“But the Quagmire kidnapping is much more important than any of those things,” Violet said.

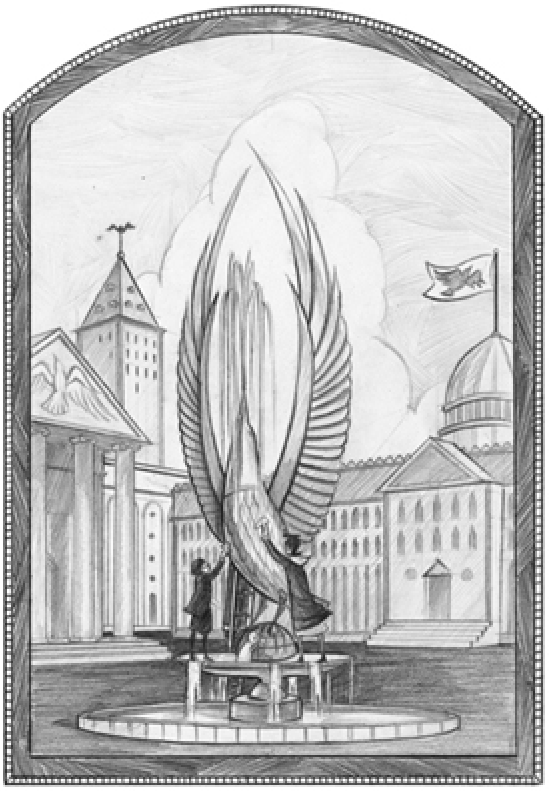
Hector sighed. “I agree with you,” he said, “but I’m not going to argue with the Council of Elders. They make me too skittish.”

“I’ll be happy to explain the situation to them,” Klaus said.

“No,” Hector decided. “It will be best to do our chores as usual. Go wash your faces, Baudelaires, and then we’ll go.”

The Baudelaires looked at one another in dismay, wishing that the handyman wasn’t quite so afraid of a group of old people wearing crow-shaped hats, but without further discussion they walked back into the house, washed their faces, and followed Hector across the flat landscape until they reached the outskirts of town and then through the uptown district, where the V.F.D. crows were roosting, until they reached the downtown house of Mrs. Morrow, who was waiting in her pink robe on her front porch. Without a word she handed Hector a pair of hedge clippers, which are nothing more than large scissors designed to cut branches and leaves rather than paper, and gave each Baudelaire a large plastic bag to gather up the leaves and branches Hector would snip off. Hedge clippers and a plastic bag are not appropriate methods of greeting someone, of course, particularly first thing in the morning, but the three siblings were so busy thinking about what the poems could mean that they scarcely noticed. As they gathered up the hedge trimmings they floated several theories—the phrase “floated several theories” here means “talked quietly about the two couplets by Isadora Quagmire”—until the hedge looked nice and neat and it was time to walk down the block to where Mr. Lesko lived. Mr. Lesko—whom the Baudelaires recognized as the man in plaid pants who was worried that the children might have to live with him—was even ruder than Mrs. Morrow. He merely pointed at a pile of window-cleaning supplies and stomped back into his house, but once again the Baudelaires were concentrating on solving the mystery of the two messages they had been left, and scarcely noticed Mr. Lesko’s rudeness. Violet and Klaus each began scrubbing dirt off a window with a damp rag, while Sunny stood by with a bucket of soapy water and Hector climbed up to clean the windows on the second floor, but all the children thought of was each line of Isadora’s confusing poem, until they were finished with the windows and were ready to go to work on the rest of the chores for the day, which I will not describe for you, not only because they were so boring that I would fall asleep while writing them down on paper, but because the Baudelaire orphans scarcely noticed them. The children thought about the couplets while they polished the Verhoogen doorknobs, and they thought about them when they swept the feathers from the street into a dustpan that Sunny held while crawling in front of her siblings, but they still could not imagine how Isadora managed to leave a poem underneath Nevermore Tree. They thought about the couplets as they carried the garbage and recyclables from all of V.F.D.’s downtown residents, and they thought about them as they ate a lunch of cabbage sandwiches that one of V.F.D.’s restaurant owners had agreed to provide as his part in the village’s attempt to raise the children, but they still could not figure out what Isadora was trying to tell them. They thought of the couplets when Hector read out the list of afternoon chores, which included such tedious duties as making citizens’ beds, washing townspeople’s dishes, preparing enough hot fudge sundaes for the entire Council of Elders to enjoy as an afternoon snack, and polishing Fowl Fountain, but no matter how hard they thought, the Baudelaires got no closer to solving the couplets’ mysteries.

“I’m very impressed with how hard you three children are working,” Hector said, as he and the children began their last afternoon chore. Fowl Fountain was made in the shape of an enormous crow, and stood in the middle of the uptown district, in a courtyard with many different streets leading out of it. The children were scrubbing at the crow’s metal body, which was covered in carvings of feather shapes to make it look more realistic. Hector was standing on a ladder scrubbing at the crow’s metal head, which was facing straight up and spitting a steady stream of water out of a hole fashioned to look like its mouth, as if the enormous bird were gargling and spitting water all over its own body. The effect was hideous, but the V.F.D. crows must have thought differently, because the fountain was covered in feathers that they had left behind during their uptown morning roost. “When the Council of Elders told me that the village was serving as your guardian,” Hector continued, “I was afraid that three small children wouldn’t be able to do all these chores without complaining.”



“We’re used to strenuous exercise,” Violet replied. “When we lived in Paltryville, we debarked trees and sawed them into boards, and at Prufrock Preparatory School we had to run hundreds of laps every night.”

“Besides,” Klaus said, “we’re so busy thinking about the couplets that we’ve scarcely noticed our work.”

“I thought that’s why you were so quiet,” Hector said. “How do the poems go again?”

The Baudelaires had looked at the two scraps of paper so many times over the course of the day that they could recite both poems from memory.

“For sapphires we are held in here.
Only you can end our fear.”

Violet said.

“Until dawn comes we cannot speak.
No words can come from this sad beak.”

Klaus said.

“Dulch!” Sunny added, which meant something like, “And we still haven’t figured out what they really mean.”

“They’re tricky, all right,” Hector said. “In fact, I…”

Here his voice trailed off, and the children were startled to see the handyman turn around so he was no longer facing them and begin to scrub the left eye of the metal crow, as if someone had flicked a switch that stopped him from talking.

“Fowl Fountain still doesn’t look completely clean,” said a stern voice from behind the children, and the Baudelaires turned around to see three women from the Council of Elders who had entered the courtyard and now stood frowning at them. Hector was so skittish that he didn’t even look up to answer, but the children were not nearly as intimidated, a word which here means “made skittish by three older women wearing crow-shaped hats.”

“We’re not completely finished cleaning it,” Violet explained politely. “I do hope you enjoyed your hot fudge sundaes that we prepared for you earlier.”

“They were O.K.,” one of them said, with a shrug that bobbed her crow hat slightly.

“Mine had too many nuts,” another one of them said. “Rule #961 clearly states that the Council of Elders’ hot fudge sundaes cannot have more than fifteen pieces of nuts each, and mine might have had more than that."

"I'm very sorry to hear that," Klaus said, not adding that anyone who is so picky about a hot fudge sundae should make it themselves.

"We've stacked up the dirty ice cream dishes in the Snack Hut," the third one said. "Tomorrow afternoon you'll wash them as part of your uptown chores. But we came to tell Hector something."

The children looked up to the top of the ladder, thinking that Hector would have to turn around and speak to them now, no matter how skittish he was. But he merely gave a little cough, and continued to scrub at Fowl Fountain. Violet remembered what her father had taught her to say when he was unable to come to the phone, and she spoke up.

"I'm sorry," she said. "Hector is occupied at the moment. May I give him a message?"

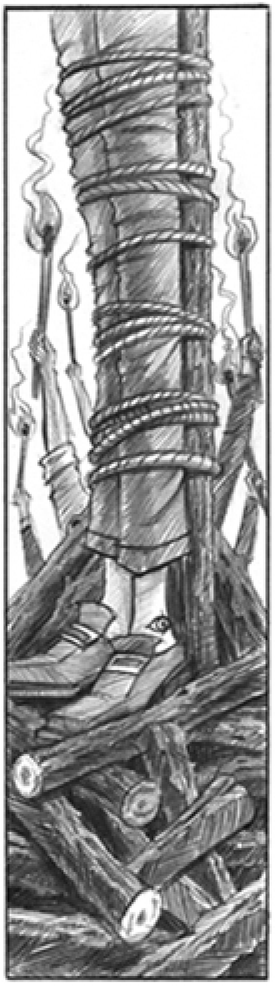
The Elders looked at one another and nodded, which made it look like their hats were pecking at one another. "I suppose so," one of them said. "If we can trust a little girl like you to deliver it."

"The message is very important," the second one said, and once again I find it necessary to use the expression "bolt from the blue." You would think, after the mysterious appearance of not one but two poems by Isadora Quagmire at the base of Nevermore Tree, that no more bolts from the blue would appear in the village of V.F.D. A bolt of lightning, after all, rarely comes down from a clear blue sky and strikes the exact same place more than once. But for the Baudelaire orphans, life seemed to be little else than bolt after unfortunate bolt from the blue, ever since Mr. Poe had delivered the first bolt from the blue in telling them that their parents had been killed, and no matter how many bolts from the blue they experienced, their heads never spun any less, and their legs never got less wobbly, and their bodies never buzzed any less with astonishment when another bolt arrived from the blue. So when the Baudelaires heard the Elders' message, they almost had to sit down in Fowl Fountain, because the message was such an utter surprise. It was a message that they thought they might never hear, and it is a message that only reaches me in my most pleasant dreams, which are few and far between.

"The message is this," said the third member of the Council of Elders, and she leaned her head in close so that the children could see every felt feather of her crow hat. "Count Olaf has been captured," she said, and the Baudelaires felt as if a bolt of lightning had struck them once more.

CHAPTER
Six

Although “jumping to conclusions” is an expression, rather than an activity, it is as dangerous as jumping off a cliff, jumping in front of a moving train, and jumping for joy. If you jump off a cliff, you have a very good chance of experiencing a painful landing unless there is something below you to cushion your fall, such as a body of water or an immense pile of tissue paper. If you jump in front of a moving train, you have a very good chance of experiencing a painful voyage unless you are wearing some sort of train-proof suit. And if you jump for joy, you have a very good chance of experiencing a painful bump on the head, unless you make sure you are standing someplace with very high ceilings, which joyous people rarely do. Clearly, the solution to anything involving jumping is either to make sure you are jumping to a safe place, or not to jump at all.



But it is hard not to jump at all when you are jumping to conclusions, and it is impossible to make sure that you are jumping to a safe place, because all “jumping to conclusions” means is that you are believing something is true even though you don’t actually know whether it is or not. When the Baudelaire orphans heard from the three members of V.F.D.’s Council of Elders that Count Olaf had been captured, they were so excited that they immediately jumped to the conclusion that it was true.

“It’s true,” said one of the Elders, which didn’t help things any. “A man arrived in town this morning, with one eyebrow and a tattoo of an eye on his ankle.”

“It must be Olaf,” Violet said, jumping to conclusions.

"Of course it is," the second Council member said. "He matched the description that Mr. Poe gave us, so we arrested him immediately."

"So it's true," Klaus said, joining his sister in the jump. "You've really captured Count Olaf."

"Of course it's true," the third woman said impatiently. "We've even contacted *The Daily Punctilio*, and they'll write a story about it. Soon the whole world will know that Count Olaf has been captured at last."

"Hooray!" cried Sunny, the last Baudelaire to jump to conclusions.

"The Council of Elders has called a special meeting," said the woman who appeared to be the eldest Elder. Her crow hat bobbed in excitement as she spoke. "All citizens are required to go to Town Hall immediately, to discuss what is to be done with him. After all, Rule #19,833 clearly states that no villains are allowed within the city limits. The usual punishment for breaking a rule is burning at the stake."

"Burning at the stake?" Violet said.

"Of course," an Elder said. "Whenever we capture rulebreakers, we tie them to a wooden pole and light a fire underneath their feet. That's why I warned you about the number of nuts on my hot fudge sundae. It would be a shame to light you on fire."

"You mean the punishment is the same, no matter what rule you break?" Klaus asked.

"Of course," another Elder replied. "Rule #2 clearly states that anyone who breaks a rule is burned at the stake. If we didn't burn a rule-breaker at the stake, we would be rulebreakers ourselves, and someone else would have to burn us at the stake. Understand?"

"Sort of," Violet said, although in truth she didn't understand it at all. None of the Baudelaires did. Although they despised Count Olaf, the children didn't like the idea of lighting him on fire. Burning a villain at the stake felt like something a villain would do rather than something done by fowl devotees.

“But Count Olaf isn’t just a rulebreaker,” Klaus said, choosing his words very carefully. “He has committed all sorts of terrible crimes. It would seem best to turn him over to the authorities, rather than burning him at the stake.”

“Well, that’s something we can talk about at the meeting,” a Councilwoman said, “and we’d better hurry or we’ll be late. Hector, get down from that ladder.”

Hector didn’t answer, but he got down from the ladder and followed the three members of the Council of Elders away from Fowl Fountain, keeping his eyes on the ground at all times. The Baudelaires followed Hector, their stomachs fluttering as they walked through the uptown district to the downtown one, where the crows were roosting as they had been yesterday, when the children had first arrived in V.F.D. Their stomachs were fluttering with relief and excitement, because they believed that Count Olaf had been captured, but also with nervousness and fear, because they hated the idea that he might be burned at the stake. The punishment for V.F.D. rulebreakers made the Baudelaires remember their parents’ deaths, and they didn’t like the idea of anyone being lit on fire, no matter how vile a person they were. It was unpleasant to feel relief, excitement, nervousness, and fear all at once, and by the time they arrived at Town Hall, the stomachs of the Baudelaire orphans were as fluttery as the crows, which were muttering and scuffling as far as the eye could see.

When one’s stomach is as fluttery as all that, it is nice to take a short break to lie down and perhaps sip a fizzy beverage, but there was no time for such things. The three members of the Council led the way to the large room in Town Hall decorated with portraits of crows. The room was in pandemonium, a phrase which here means “filled with Elders and townspeople standing around arguing.” The Baudelaires scanned the room for a sign of Olaf, but it was impossible to see anyone over the bobbing crow heads.

“We need to begin the meeting!” called one of the Council. “Elders, find your places on the bench. Townspeople, find your places on folding chairs.” The townspeople stopped talking at once and hurried into their seats, perhaps afraid that they would be burned at the stake if they didn’t sit down quickly enough. Violet and Klaus sat down next to Hector, who was still staring at the floor in silence, and picked up Sunny so she could see.

“Hector, place Officer Luciana and Count Olaf on the platform for discussion,” an Elder ordered, as the last few townspeople sat down.

“There’s no need,” called out a grand voice from the back of the room, and the children turned around to see Officer Luciana, with a big red grin beneath the visor of her helmet. “I can get to the platform myself. After all, I’m the Chief of Police.”

“That’s true,” another Elder said, and several other people on the bench nodded their crow hats in agreement as Luciana strolled to the platform, each of her black boots making a loud *clunk*! on the shiny floor.

“I’m proud to say,” Officer Luciana said proudly, “that I’ve already made the first arrest of my career as Chief of Police. Isn’t that smashing?”

“Hear, hear!” cried several townspeople.

“And now,” Luciana continued, “let’s meet the man we’re all dying to burn at the stake—Count Olaf!”

With a grand gesture, Officer Luciana stepped off the platform, clunked to the back of the room, and dragged a frightened-looking man out of a folding chair. He was dressed in a rumpled suit with a large rip across the shoulder, and a pair of shiny silver handcuffs. He wasn’t wearing any shoes or socks, and as Officer Luciana marched him to the platform the children could see that he had a tattoo of an eye on his left ankle, just like Count Olaf had. And when he turned his head and gazed around the room, the children could see that he had only one eyebrow, instead of two, just like Count Olaf had. But the children could also see that he wasn’t Count Olaf. He wasn’t as tall as Count Olaf, and he wasn’t quite as thin, and there wasn’t dirt under his fingernails, or a nasty and greedy look in his eyes. But most of all the Baudelaires could see that he wasn’t Count Olaf the way you could tell that a stranger wasn’t your uncle, even if he were wearing the same polka-dot coat and curly wig that your uncle always wore. The three siblings looked at one another, and then at the man being dragged onto the platform, and they realized with a sinking feeling that they had been jumping to conclusions about Olaf’s capture.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” Officer Luciana said, “and orphans, I give you Count Olaf!”

“But I’m not Count Olaf!” the man cried. “My name is Jacques, and—”

“Silence!” commanded one of the meanest-looking members of the Council of Elders. “Rule #920 clearly states that no one may talk while on the platform.”

“Let’s burn him at the stake!” cried a voice, and the children turned to see Mr. Lesko standing up and pointing at the trembling man on the platform. “We haven’t burned anyone at the stake for a long time!”

Several members of the Council nodded their heads. “That’s a good point,” one of them said.

“He’s Olaf, all right,” Mrs. Morrow called from the far side of the room. “He has one eyebrow instead of two, and there’s a tattoo of an eye on his ankle.”

“But lots of people have only one eyebrow,” Jacques cried, “and I have this tattoo as part of my job.”

“And your job is villain!” Mr. Lesko called out triumphantly. “Rule #19,833 clearly states that no villains are allowed within the city limits, so we get to burn you at the stake!”

“Hear, hear!” called several voices in agreement.

“I’m not a villain!” Jacques said frantically. “I work for the volunteer —”

“Enough is enough!” said one of the youngest Elders. “Olaf, you have already been warned about Rule #920. You are not allowed to speak when you are on the platform. Do any more citizens wish to speak before we schedule the burning of Olaf at the stake?”

Violet stood up, which is not an easy thing to do if your head is still spinning, your legs are still wobbly, and your body is still buzzing with astonishment. “I wish to speak,” she said. “The town of V.F.D. is my guardian, and so I am a citizen.”

Klaus, who had Sunny in his arms, stood up and took his place beside his sister. “This man,” he said, pointing at Jacques, “is not Count Olaf. Officer Luciana has made a mistake in arresting him, and we don’t want to make things worse by burning an innocent man at the stake.”

Jacques gave the children a grateful smile, but Officer Luciana turned around and clunked over to where the Baudelaires were standing. The children could not see her eyes, because the visor on her helmet was still down, but her bright red lips curled into a tight smile. “It is you who are making things worse,” she said, and then turned to the Council of Elders. “Obviously, the shock of seeing Count Olaf has confused these children,” she said to them.

“Of course it has!” agreed an Elder. “Speaking as a member of the town serving as their legal guardian, I say that these children clearly need to be put to bed. Now, are there any adults who wish to speak?”

The Baudelaires looked over at Hector, in the hopes that he would overcome his nervousness and stand up to speak. Surely he didn’t believe that the three siblings were so confused that they didn’t know who Count Olaf was. But Hector did not rise to the occasion, a phrase which here means “continued to sit in his folding chair with his eyes cast downward,” and after a moment the Council of Elders closed the matter.

“I hereby close the matter,” an Elder said. “Hector, please take the Baudelaires home.”

“Yes!” called out a member of the Verhoogen family. “Put the orphans to bed and burn Olaf at the stake!”

“Hear, hear!” several voices cried.

One of the Council of Elders shook his head. “It’s too late to burn anyone at the stake today,” he said, and there was a mutter of disappointment from the townspeople. “We will burn Count Olaf at the stake right after breakfast,” he continued. “All uptown residents should bring flaming torches, and all downtown residents should bring wood for kindling and some sort of healthy snack. See you tomorrow.”

“And in the meantime,” Officer Luciana announced, “I will keep him in the uptown jail, across from Fowl Fountain.”

“But I’m innocent!” the man on the platform cried. “Please listen to me, I beg of you! I’m not Count Olaf! My name is Jacques!” He turned to the three siblings, who could see he had tears in his eyes. “Oh, Baudelaires,” he said, “I am so relieved to see that you are alive. Your parents—”

“That’s enough out of you,” Officer Luciana said, clasping her white-gloved hand over Jacques’s mouth.

“Pipit!” Sunny shrieked, which meant “Wait!” but Officer Luciana either didn’t listen or didn’t care, and she quickly dragged Jacques out the door before he could say another word. The townspeople rose up in their folding chairs to watch him go, and then began talking among themselves as the Council of Elders left the bench. The Baudelaires saw Mr. Lesko share a joke with the Verhoogen family, as if the entire evening had been a jolly party instead of a meeting sentencing an innocent man to death. “Pipit!” Sunny shrieked again, but nobody listened. His eyes still on the floor, Hector took Violet and Klaus by the hand and led them out of Town Hall. The handyman did not say a word, and the Baudelaires didn’t, either. Their stomachs felt too fluttery and their hearts too heavy to even open their mouths. As they left the council meeting without another glimpse of Jacques or Officer Luciana, they felt a pain even worse than that of jumping to conclusions. The children felt as if they had jumped off a cliff, or jumped in front of a moving train. As they stepped out of Town Hall into the still night air, the Baudelaire orphans felt as if they would never jump for joy again.

CHAPTER
Seven

In this large and fierce world of ours, there are many, many unpleasant places to be. You can be in a river swarming with angry electric eels, or in a supermarket filled with vicious long-distance runners. You can be in a hotel that has no room service, or you can be lost in a forest that is slowly filling up with water. You can be in a hornet's nest or in an abandoned airport or in the office of a pediatric surgeon, but one of the most unpleasant things that can happen is to find yourself in a quandary, which is where the Baudelaire orphans found themselves that night. Finding yourself in a quandary means that everything seems confusing and dangerous and you don't know what in the world to do about it, and it is one of the worst unpleasantries you can encounter. The three Baudelaires sat in Hector's kitchen as the handyman prepared another Mexican dinner, and compared with the quandary they were in, all their other problems felt like the small potatoes he was chopping into thirds.

“Everything seems confusing,” Violet said glumly. “The Quagmire triplets are somewhere nearby, but we don’t know where, and the only clues we have are two confusing poems. And now, there’s a man who isn’t Count Olaf, but he has an eye tattooed on his ankle, and he wanted to tell us something about our parents.”

“It’s more than confusing,” Klaus said. “It’s dangerous. We need to rescue the Quagmires before Count Olaf does something dreadful, and we need to convince the Council of Elders that the man they arrested is really Jacques, otherwise they’ll burn him at the stake.”

“Quandary?” Sunny said, which meant something along the lines of “What in the world can we do about it?”

“I don’t know what we *can* do about it, Sunny,” Violet replied. “We spent all day trying to figure out what the poems meant, and we tried our best to convince the Council of Elders that Officer Luciana made a mistake." She and her siblings looked at Hector, who had certainly not tried his best with the Council of Elders but instead had sat in his folding chair without saying a word.

Hector sighed and looked unhappily at the children. "I know I should have said something," he told them, "but I was far too skittish. The Council of Elders is so imposing that I can never say a word in their presence. However, I can think of something that we can do to help."

"What is it?" Klaus asked.

"We can enjoy these huevos rancheros," he said. "Huevos rancheros are fried eggs and beans, served with tortillas and potatoes in a spicy tomato sauce."

The siblings looked at one another, trying to imagine how a Mexican dish would get them out of their quandary. "How will that help?" Violet asked doubtfully.

"I don't know," Hector admitted. "But they're almost ready, and my recipe is a delicious one, if I do say so myself. Come on, let's eat. Maybe a good dinner will help you think of something."

The children sighed, but nodded their heads in agreement and got up to set the table, and curiously enough, a good dinner did in fact help the Baudelaires think of something. As Violet took her first bite of beans, she felt the gears and levers of her inventing brain spring into action. As Klaus dipped his tortilla into the spicy tomato sauce, he began to think of books he had read that might be helpful. And as Sunny smeared egg yolks all over her face, she clicked her four sharp teeth together and tried to think of a way that they might be useful. By the time the Baudelaires were finishing the meal Hector had prepared for them, their ideas had grown and developed into full-fledged plans, just as Nevermore Tree had grown a long time ago from a tiny seed and Fowl Fountain had been built recently from someone's hideous blueprint.

It was Sunny who spoke up first. "Plan!" she said.

“What is it, Sunny?” Klaus asked.

With a tiny finger covered in tomato sauce, Sunny pointed out the window at Nevermore Tree, which was covered in the V.F.D. crows as it was every evening. “Merganser!” she said firmly.

“My sister says that tomorrow morning there will probably be another poem from Isadora in the same spot,” Klaus explained to Hector. “She wants to spend the night underneath the tree. She’s so small that whoever is delivering the poems probably won’t spot her, and she’ll be able to find out how the couplets are getting to us.”

“And that should bring us closer to finding the Quagmires,” Violet said. “That’s a good plan, Sunny.”

“My goodness, Sunny,” Hector said. “Won’t you be frightened spending all night underneath a whole murder of crows?”

“Therill,” Sunny said, which meant “It won’t be any more frightening than the time I climbed up an elevator shaft with my teeth.”

“I think I have a good plan, too,” Klaus said. “Hector, yesterday you told us about the secret library you have in the barn.”

“Ssh!” Hector said, looking around the kitchen. “Not so loud! You know it’s against the rules to have all those books, and I don’t want to be burned at the stake.”

“I don’t want *anyone* to be burned at the stake,” Klaus said. “Now, does the secret library contain books about the rules of V.F.D.?”

“Absolutely,” Hector said. “Lots of them. Because the rule books describe people breaking the rules, they break Rule #108, which clearly states that the V.F.D. library cannot contain any books that break any of the rules.”

“Well, I’m going to read as many rule books as I can,” Klaus said. “There must be a way to save Jacques from being burned at the stake, and I bet I'll find it in the pages of those books."

"My word, Klaus," Hector said. "Won't you be bored reading all those rule books?"

"It won't be any more boring than the time I had to read all about grammar, in order to save Aunt Josephine," he replied.

"Sunny is working to save the Quagmires," Violet said, "and Klaus is working to save Jacques. I've got to work to save *us*."

"What do you mean?" Klaus asked.

"Well, I think Count Olaf must be behind all this trouble," Violet said.

"Grebe!" Sunny said, which meant "As usual!"

"If the town of V.F.D. burns Jacques at the stake," Violet continued, "then everyone will think Count Olaf is dead. I bet *The Daily Punctilio* will even have a story that says so. It will be very good news for Olaf—the real one, that is. If everyone thinks he's dead, Olaf can be as treacherous as he likes, and the authorities won't come looking for him."

"That's true," Klaus said. "Count Olaf must have found Jacques—whoever he is—and brought him into town. He knew that Officer Luciana would think he was Olaf. But what does that have to do with saving us?"

"Well, if we rescue the Quagmires and prove that Jacques is innocent," Violet said, "Count Olaf will come after us, and we can't rely on the Council of Elders to protect us."

"Poe!" Sunny said.

"Or Mr. Poe," Violet agreed. "That's why we'll need a way to save ourselves." She turned to Hector. "Yesterday, you also told us about your self-sustaining hot air mobile home."

Hector looked around the kitchen again, to make sure no one was listening. "Yes," he said, "but I think I'm going to stop work on it. If the

Council of Elders learns that I’m breaking Rule #67, I could be burned at the stake. Anyway, I can’t seem to get the engine to work.”

“If you don’t mind, I’d like to take a look at it,” Violet said. “Maybe I could help finish it. You wanted to use the self-sustaining hot air mobile home to escape from V.F.D. and the Council of Elders and everything else that makes you skittish, but it would also make an excellent escape vehicle.”

“Maybe it could be both,” Hector said shyly, and reached across the table to pat Sunny on the shoulder. “I very much enjoy the company of you three children, and it would be delightful to share a mobile home with you. There’s plenty of room in the self-sustaining hot air mobile home, and once we get it to work we could launch it and never come down. Count Olaf and his associates would never be able to bother you again. What do you think?”

The three Baudelaires listened closely to Hector’s suggestion, but when they tried to tell him what they thought, it felt like they were in a quandary all over again. On one hand, it would be exciting to live in such an unusual way, and the thought of being safe forever from Count Olaf’s evil clutches was very appealing, to say the least. Violet looked at her baby sister and thought about the promise she had made, when Sunny was born, that she would always look after her younger siblings and make sure they wouldn’t get into trouble. Klaus looked at Hector, who was the only citizen in this vile village who really seemed to care about the children, as a guardian should. And Sunny looked out the window at the evening sky, and remembered the first time she and her siblings saw the V.F.D. crows fly in superlative circles and wished that they, too, could escape from all their worries. But on the other hand, the Baudelaires felt that flying away from all their trouble, and living forever up in the sky, didn’t seem to be a proper way to live one’s life. Sunny was a baby, Klaus was only twelve, and even Violet, the eldest, was fourteen, which is not really so old. The Baudelaires had many things they hoped to accomplish on the ground, and they weren’t sure that they could simply abandon all those hopes so early in their lives. The Baudelaires sat at the table and thought about Hector’s plan, and it seemed to the children that if they spent the rest of their lives floating around the heavens, they simply wouldn't be in their element, a phrase which here means "in the sort of home the three siblings would prefer."

"First things first," Violet said finally, hoping that she wasn't hurting Hector's feelings. "Before we make a decision about the rest of our lives, let's get Duncan and Isadora out of Olaf's clutches."

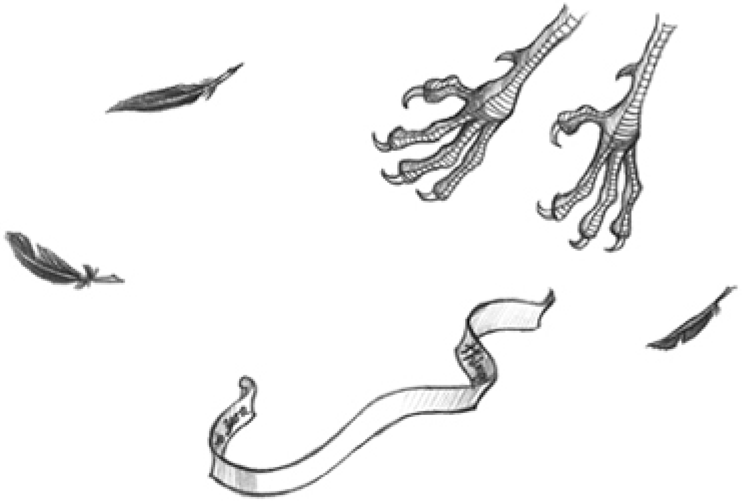
"And make sure Jacques won't be burned at the stake," Klaus said.

"Albico!" Sunny added, which meant something like, "And let's solve the mystery of V.F.D. that the Quagmires told us about!"

Hector sighed. "You're right," he said. "Those things are more important, even if they do make me skittish. Well, let's take Sunny to the tree and then it's off to the barn, where the library and inventing studio are. It looks like it's going to be another long night, but hopefully this time we won't be barking up the wrong tree."

The Baudelaires smiled at the handyman and followed him out into the night, which was cool and breezy and filled with the sounds of the murder of crows settling down for the night. They kept on smiling as they separated, with Sunny crawling toward Nevermore Tree and the two older Baudelaires following Hector to the barn, and they continued to smile as they began to put each of their plans into action. Violet smiled because Hector's inventing studio was very well-equipped, with plenty of pliers and glue and wire and everything her inventing brain needed, and because Hector's self-sustaining hot air mobile home was an enormous, fascinating mechanism—just the sort of challenging invention she loved to work on. Klaus smiled because Hector's library was very comfortable, with some good sturdy tables and cushioned chairs just perfect for reading in, and because the books on the rules of V.F.D. were very thick and full of difficult words—just the sort of challenging reading he enjoyed. And Sunny smiled because there were several dead branches of Nevermore Tree that had fallen to the ground, so she would have something to gnaw on as she hid and waited for the next couplet to arrive. The children were in their elements. Violet was in her element at the inventing studio, and Klaus was in his element at the library, and Sunny was in hers just from being low to the ground and near something she could bite. Violet tied her hair up in a ribbon to keep it out of her eyes, and Klaus polished his glasses, and Sunny stretched her mouth to get her teeth ready for the task ahead of her, and the three siblings smiled more than they had since their arrival in town. The Baudelaire orphans were in their elements, and they hoped that being in their elements would lead them out of their quandary.

CHAPTER
Eight



The next morning began with a colorful and lengthy sunrise, which Sunny saw from her hiding place at the bottom of Nevermore Tree. It continued with the sounds of awakening crows, which Klaus heard from the library in the barn, and followed with the sight of the birds making their familiar circle in the sky, which Violet saw just as she was leaving the inventing studio. By the time Klaus joined his sister outside the barn, and Sunny crawled across the flat landscape to reach them, the birds had stopped circling and were flying together uptown, and the morning was so pretty and peaceful that as I describe it I can almost forget that it was a very, very sad morning for me, a morning that I wish I could strike forever from the Snicket calendar. But I can't erase this day, any more than I can write a happy ending to this book, for the simple reason that the story does not go that way. No matter how lovely the morning was, or how confident the Baudelaires felt about what they had discovered over the course of the night, there isn't a happy ending on the horizon of this story, any more than there was an elephant on the horizon of V.F.D.

"Good morning," Violet said to Klaus, and yawned.

“Good morning,” Klaus replied. He was holding two books in his arms, but nevertheless he managed to wave at Sunny, who was still crawling toward them. “How did everything go with Hector in the inventing studio?”

“Well, Hector fell asleep a few hours ago,” Violet said, “but I discovered a few small flaws in the self-sustaining hot air mobile home. The engine conductivity was low, due to some problems with the electromagnetic generator Hector built. This meant that the inflation rate of the balloons was often uneven, so I reconfigured some key conduits. Also, the water circulation system was run on ill-fitting pipes, which meant that the self-sustaining aspect of the food center probably wouldn’t last as long as it should, so I rerouted some of the aquacycling.”

“Ning!” Sunny called, as she reached her siblings.

“Good morning, Sunny,” Klaus said. “Violet was just telling me that she noticed a few things wrong with Hector’s invention, but she thinks she fixed them.”

“Well, I’d like to test the whole device out before we go up in it, if there’s time,” Violet said, picking up Sunny and holding her, “but I think everything should work pretty well. It’s a fantastic invention. A small group of people could really spend the rest of their lives safely in the air. Did you discover anything in the library?”

“Well, first I discovered that books about V.F.D. rules are actually quite fascinating,” Klaus said. “Rule #19, for instance, clearly states that the only pens that are acceptable within the city limits are ones made from the feathers of crows. And yet Rule #39 clearly states that it is illegal to make anything out of crow feathers. How can the townspeople obey both rules at once?”

“Maybe they don’t have any pens at all,” Violet said, “but that’s not important. Did you discover anything helpful in the rule books?”

“Yes,” Klaus said, and opened one of the books he was carrying. “Listen to this: Rule #2,493 clearly states that any person who is going to be burned at the stake has the opportunity to make a speech right before the fire is lit. We can go to the uptown jail this morning and make sure Jacques gets that opportunity. In his speech, he can tell people who he really is, and why he has that tattoo."

"But he tried to do that yesterday at the meeting," Violet said. "Nobody believed him. Nobody even *listened* to him."

"I was thinking the same thing," Klaus said, opening the second book, "until I read this."

"Towhee?" Sunny asked, which meant something like "Is there a rule that clearly states that people must listen to speeches?"

"No," Klaus replied. "This isn't a rule book. This is a book about psychology, the study of the mind. It was removed from the library because there's a chapter about the Cherokee tribe of North America. They make all sorts of things out of feathers, which breaks Rule #39."

"That's ridiculous," Violet said.

"I agree," Klaus said, "but I'm glad this book was here, instead of in town, because it gave me an idea. There's a chapter here about mob psychology."

"Wazay?" Sunny asked.

"A mob is a crowd of people," Klaus explained, "usually an angry one."

"Like the townspeople and the Council of Elders yesterday," Violet said, "in Town Hall. They were incredibly angry."

"Exactly," Klaus said. "Now listen to this." The middle Baudelaire opened the second book and began to read out loud. "'The subliminal emotional tenor of a mob's unruliness lies in solitary opinions, expressed emphatically at various points in the stereo field.'"

"Tenor? Stereo?" Violet asked. "It sounds like you're talking about opera."

“The book uses a lot of complicated words,” Klaus said, “but luckily there was a dictionary in Hector’s library. It had been removed from V.F.D. because it defined the phrase ‘mechanical device.’ All that sentence means is that if a few people, scattered throughout the crowd, begin to shout their opinions, soon the whole mob will agree with them. It happened in the council meeting yesterday—a few people said angry things, and soon the whole room was angry.”

“Vue,” Sunny said, which meant “Yes, I remember.”

“When we get to the jail,” Klaus said, “we’ll make sure that Jacques is allowed to give his speech. Then, as he explains himself, we’ll scatter ourselves throughout the crowd and shout things like, ‘I believe him!’ and ‘Hear, hear!’ Mob psychology should make everyone demand Jacques’s freedom.”

“Do you really think that will work?” Violet asked.

“Well, I’d prefer to test it first,” Klaus said, “just like you’d prefer to test the self-sustaining hot air mobile home. But we don’t have time. Now, Sunny, what did you discover from spending the night under a tree?”

Sunny held up one of her small hands to show them another scrap of paper. “Couplet!” she cried out triumphantly, and her siblings gathered around to read it.

The first thing you read contains the clue:
An initial way to speak to you.

“Good work, Sunny,” Violet said. “This is definitely another poem by Isadora Quagmire.”

“And it seems to lead us back to the first poem,” Klaus said. “It says ‘The first thing you read contains the clue.’”

“But what does ‘An initial way to speak to you’ mean?” Violet asked. “Initials, like V.F.D.?”

“Maybe,” Klaus replied, “but the word ‘initial’ can also mean ‘first.’ I think Isadora means that this is the first way she can speak to us—through these poems.”

“But we already know that,” Violet said. “The Quagmires wouldn’t have to tell us. Let’s look at all the poems together. Maybe it will give us a complete picture.”

Violet took the other two poems out of her pocket, and the three children looked at them together.

For sapphires we are held in here.
Only you can end our fear.

Until dawn comes we cannot speak.
No words can come from this sad beak.

The first thing you read contains the clue:
An initial way to speak to you.

“The part about the beak is still the most confusing,” Klaus said.

“Leucophrys!” Sunny said, which meant “I think I can explain that—the crows are delivering the couplets.”

“How can that be possible?” Violet asked.

“Loidya!” Sunny answered. She meant something like “I’m absolutely sure that nobody approached the tree all night, and at dawn the note dropped down from the branches of the tree.”

“I’ve heard of carrier pigeons,” Klaus said. “Those are birds that carry messages for a living. But I’ve never heard of carrier crows.”

“Maybe they don’t know that they’re carrier crows,” Violet said. “The Quagmires could be attaching the scraps of paper to the crows in some way—putting them in their beaks, or in their feathers—and then the poems come loose when they sleep in Nevermore Tree. The triplets must be somewhere in town. But where?”

“Ko!” Sunny cried, pointing to the poems.

“Sunny’s right,” Klaus said excitedly. “It says ‘Until dawn comes we cannot speak.’ That means they’re attaching the poems in the morning, when the crows roost uptown.”

“Well, that’s one more reason to get uptown,” Violet replied. “We can save Jacques before he’s burned at the stake, and search for the Quagmires. Without you, Sunny, we wouldn’t know where to look for the Quagmires.”

“Hasserin,” Sunny said, which meant “And without you, Klaus, we wouldn’t know how to save Jacques.”

“And without you, Violet,” Klaus said, “we’d have no chance of escaping from this town.”

“And if we keep standing here,” Violet said, “we won’t save anybody. Let’s go wake up Hector, and get moving. The Council of Elders said they’d burn Jacques at the stake right after breakfast.”

“Yikes!” Sunny said, which meant “That doesn’t give us much time,” so the Baudelaires didn’t take much time walking into the barn and through Hector’s library, which was so massive that the two Baudelaire sisters could not believe Klaus had managed to find helpful information among the shelves and shelves of books. There were bookshelves so tall you had to stand on a ladder to reach their highest shelves, and ones so short that you had to crawl on the floor to read their titles. There were books that looked too heavy to move, and books that looked too light to stay in one place, and there were books that looked so dull that the sisters could not imagine anyone reading them—but these were the books that were still stacked in huge heaps, spread out on the tables after Klaus’s all-night reading session.

Violet and Sunny wanted to pause for a moment and take it all in, but they knew that they didn't have much time.

Behind the last bookshelf of the library was Hector's inventing studio, where Klaus and Sunny got their first glimpse of the self-sustaining hot air mobile home, which was a marvelous contraption. Twelve enormous baskets, each about the size of a small room, were stacked up in the corner, connected by all sorts of different tubes, pipes, and wires, and circled around the baskets were a series of large metal tanks, wooden grates, glass jugs, paper bags, plastic containers, and rolls of twine, along with a number of large mechanical devices with buttons, switches, and gears, and a big pile of deflated balloons. The self-sustaining hot air mobile home was so immense and complicated that it reminded the two younger Baudelaires of what they thought of when they pictured Violet's inventive brain, and every piece of it looked so interesting that Klaus and Sunny could scarcely decide what to look at first. But the Baudelaires knew that they didn't have much time, so rather than explain the invention to her siblings, Violet walked quickly over to one of the baskets, which Klaus and Sunny were surprised to see contained a bed, which in turn contained a sleeping Hector.

"Good morning," the handyman said, when Violet gently shook him awake.

"It *is* a good morning," she replied. "We've discovered some marvelous things. We'll explain everything on our way uptown."

"Uptown?" Hector said, stepping out of the basket. "But the crows are roosting uptown. We do the downtown chores in the morning, remember?"

"We're not doing any chores this morning," Klaus said firmly. "That's one of the things we need to explain."

Hector yawned, stretched and rubbed his eyes, and then smiled at the three children. "Well, fire away," he said, using a phrase which here means "begin telling me about your plans."

The siblings led Hector back through his inventing studio and secret library and waited while he locked up the barn. Then, as they took their first few steps across the flat landscape toward the uptown district, the Baudelaire orphans fired away. Violet told Hector about the improvements she had made on his invention, and Klaus told him about what he had learned in Hector's library, and Sunny told him—with some translation help from her siblings—about her discovery of how Isadora's poems were being delivered. By the time the Baudelaires were unrolling the last scrap of paper and showing Hector the third couplet, they had already reached the crow-covered outskirts of V.F.D.'s uptown district.

"So the Quagmires are somewhere in the uptown district," Hector said. "But where?"

"I don't know," Violet admitted, "but we'd better try to save Jacques first. Which way is the uptown jail?" Violet asked Hector.

"It's across from Fowl Fountain," the handyman replied, "but it looks like we won't need directions. Look what's ahead of us."

The children looked, and could see some of the townspeople holding flaming torches and walking about a block ahead of them. "It must be after breakfast," Klaus said. "Let's hurry."

The Baudelaires walked as quickly as they could between the muttering crows roosting on the ground, with Hector trailing skittishly behind them, and soon they rounded a corner and reached Fowl Fountain—or at least what they could see of it. The fountain was swarming with crows who were fluttering their wings in the water in order to give themselves a morning bath, and the Baudelaires could scarcely see one metal feather of the hideous landmark. Across the courtyard was a building with bars on the windows and crows on the bars, and the torch-carrying citizens were standing in a half circle around the door of the building. More of V.F.D.'s citizens were arriving from every direction, and the three children could see a few crow-hatted members of the Council of Elders, standing together and listening to something Mrs. Morrow was saying.

"It seems we arrived in the nick of time," Violet said. "We'd better scatter ourselves throughout the crowd. Sunny, you move to the far left. I'll take the far right."

“Roger!” Sunny said, and began crawling her way through the half circle of people.

“I think I’ll just stay here,” Hector said quietly, looking down at the ground, but the children had no time to argue with him. Klaus began to walk straight down the middle of the crowd.

“Wait!” Klaus called, moving with difficulty through the people. “Rule #2,493 clearly states that any person who is going to be burned at the stake has the opportunity to make a speech right before the fire is lit!”

“Yes!” Violet cried, from the right-hand side of the crowd. “Let Jacques be heard!”

Officer Luciana stepped right in front of Violet, who almost bumped her head on the Chief’s shiny helmet. Beneath the visor of the helmet Violet could see Luciana’s lipsticked mouth rise in a very small smile. “It’s too late for that,” she said, and a few townspeople around her murmured in agreement. With a *clunk*! of one boot, she stepped aside and let Violet see what had happened. From the left-hand side of the crowd, Sunny crawled over the shoes of the person standing closest to the jail, and Klaus peered over Mr. Lesko’s shoulder to get a good look at what everyone was staring at.

Jacques was lying on the ground with his eyes closed, and two members of the Council of Elders were pulling a white sheet over him, as if they were tucking him in for a nap. But as dearly as I wish I could write that it was so, he was not sleeping. The Baudelaires had reached the uptown jail before the citizens of V.F.D. could burn him at the stake, but they still had not arrived in the nick of time.

CHAPTER
Nine

There are not very many people in the world who enjoy delivering bad news, but I'm sorry to say that Mrs. Morrow was one of them. When she caught sight of the Baudelaire orphans gathered around Jacques, she rushed across the courtyard to tell them the details.

"Wait until *The Daily Punctilio* hears about this!" she said enthusiastically, and pointed at Jacques with a sleeve of her pink robe.

“Before he could be burned at the stake, Count Omar was murdered mysteriously in his jail cell.”

“Count *Olaf*,” corrected Violet automatically.

“So you’re finally admitting that you know who he is!” she cried triumphantly.

“We don’t know who he is!” Klaus insisted, picking up his baby sister, who was quietly beginning to cry. “We only know that he is an innocent man!”

Officer Luciana clunked forward, and the crowd of townspeople and Elders parted to let her walk right up to the children. “I don’t think this is a matter for children to discuss,” she said, and raised her white-gloved hands in the air to get the crowd’s attention.

“Citizens of V.F.D.,” she said grandly, “I locked Count Olaf in the uptown jail last night, and when I arrived here in the morning he had been killed. I have the only key to the jail, so his death is quite a mystery.”

“A mystery!” Mrs. Morrow said excitedly, as the townspeople murmured behind her. “What a thrill, to be hearing about a mystery!”

“Shoart!” Sunny said tearfully. She meant something like “A dead man is not a thrill!” but only her siblings were listening to her.

“You will all be happy to know that the famous Detective Dupin has agreed to investigate this murder,” Officer Luciana continued. “He is inside the uptown jail right now, examining the scene of the crime.”

“The famous Detective Dupin!” Mr. Lesko said. “Just imagine!”

“I’ve never heard of him,” said a nearby Elder.

“Me neither,” Mr. Lesko admitted, “but I’m sure he’s very famous.”

“What happened?” Violet asked, trying not to look at the white sheet on the ground. “How was Jacques killed? Why wasn’t anybody guarding him?

How could someone have gotten into his cell if you locked it?”

Luciana turned around and faced Violet, who could see her own astonished reflection in the policewoman’s shiny helmet. “As I said before,” Luciana said again, “I don’t think this is a matter for children to discuss. Perhaps that man in overalls should take you children to a playground instead of a murder scene.”

“Or downtown, to do the morning chores,” another Elder said, his crow hat nodding. “Hector, take the orphans away.”

“Not so fast,” called a voice from the doorway of the uptown jail. It was a voice, I’m sorry to say, that the Baudelaire orphans recognized in an instant. The voice was wheezy, and scratchy, and it had a sinister smile to it, as if the person talking were telling a joke. But it was not a voice that made the children want to laugh at a punch line. It was a voice the children recognized from all of the places they had traveled since their parents had died, and a voice the children knew from all their most displeasing nightmares. It was the voice of Count Olaf.

The children’s hearts sank, and they turned to see Olaf standing in the doorway of the jail, wearing another one of his absurd disguises. He was wearing a turquoise blazer that was so brightly colored that it made Baudelaires squint, and a pair of silver pants decorated with tiny mirrors that glinted in the morning sun. A pair of enormous sunglasses covered the entire upper half of his face, hiding his one eyebrow and his shiny, shiny eyes. On his feet were a pair of bright green plastic shoes with yellow plastic lightning bolts sticking out of them, covering his ankle and hiding his tattoo. But most unpleasant of all was the fact that Olaf was wearing no shirt, only a thick gold chain with a detective’s badge in the center of it. The Baudelaires could see his pale and hairy chest peeking out at them, and it added an extra layer of unpleasantness to their fear.

“It’s just not cool,” Count Olaf said, snapping his fingers to emphasize the word “cool,” “to dismiss suspects from the scene of the crime until Detective Dupin gives the O.K.”

“But surely the orphans aren’t suspects,” one of the Elders said. “They’re only children, after all.”

“It’s just not cool,” Count Olaf said, snapping his fingers again, “to disagree with Detective Dupin.”

“I agree,” Officer Luciana said, and gave Olaf a big lipstick smile as he stepped through the doorway. “Now let’s get down to business, Dupin. Do you have any important information?”

“*We* have some important information,” Klaus said boldly. “This man is not Detective Dupin.” There were a few gasps from the crowd. “He’s Count Olaf.”

“You mean Count Omar,” Mrs. Morrow said.

“We mean *Olaf,*” Violet said, and then turned so that she was looking Count Olaf right in the sunglasses. “Those sunglasses may be hiding your eyebrow, and those shoes may be hiding your tattoo, but you can’t hide your identity. You’re Count Olaf, and you’ve kidnapped the Quagmire triplets and murdered Jacques.”

“Who in the world is Jacques?” asked an Elder. “I’m confused.”

“It’s not cool,” Olaf said with a snap, “to be confused, so let me see if I can help you.” He pointed at himself with a flourish. “I am the famous Detective Dupin. I am wearing these plastic shoes and sunglasses because they’re cool. Count Olaf is the name of the man who was murdered last night, and these three children…”—here Olaf paused to make sure everyone was listening—“are responsible for the crime.”

“Don’t be ridiculous, Olaf,” Klaus said disgustedly.

Olaf smiled nastily at all three Baudelaires. “You are making a mistake when you call me Count Olaf,” he said, “and if you continue to call me that, you will see exactly how big a mistake you are making.” Detective Dupin turned and looked up to address the crowd. “Of course, the biggest mistake these children have made is thinking they can get away with murder.”

There was a murmur of agreement from the crowd. “I never trusted those kids,” Mrs. Morrow said. “They didn’t do a very good job when they trimmed my hedges.”

“Show them the evidence,” Officer Luciana said, and Detective Dupin snapped his fingers.

“It’s not cool,” he said, “to accuse people of murder without any evidence, but luckily I found some.” He reached into the pocket of his blazer and brought out a long pink ribbon decorated with plastic daisies. “I found this right outside Count Olaf’s jail cell,” he said. “It’s a ribbon—the exact kind of ribbon that Violet Baudelaire uses to tie up her hair.”

The townspeople gasped, and Violet turned to see that the citizens of V.F.D. were looking at her with suspicion and fear, which are not pleasant ways to be looked at. “That’s not my ribbon!” Violet cried, taking her own hair ribbon out of her pocket. “My hair ribbon is right here!”

“How can we tell?” an Elder asked with a frown. “All hair ribbons look alike.”

“They don’t look alike!” Klaus said. “The one found at the murder scene is fancy and pink. My sister prefers plain ribbons, and she hates the color pink!”

“And inside the cell,” Detective Dupin continued, as if Klaus had not spoken, “I found this.” He held up a small circle made of glass. “This is one of the lenses in Klaus’s glasses.”

“But my glasses aren’t missing any lenses!” Klaus cried, as everyone turned to look at *him* in suspicion and fear. He took his glasses off and showed them to the crowd. “You can see for yourself.”

“Just because you have replaced your ribbon and your lenses,” Officer Luciana said, “doesn’t mean you’re not murderers.”

“Actually, they’re not murderers,” Detective Dupin said. “They’re accomplices.” He leaned forward so he was right in the Baudelaires’ faces, and the children could smell his sour breath as he continued talking. “You orphans are not smart enough to know what the word ‘accomplice’ means, but it means ‘helper of murderers.’”

“We know what the word ‘accomplice’ means,” Klaus said. “What are you talking about?”

“I’m talking about the four toothmarks on Count Olaf’s body,” Detective Dupin said, with a snap of his fingers. “There’s only one person uncool enough to bite people to death, and that’s Sunny Baudelaire.”

“It’s true that her teeth are sharp,” another member of the Council said. “I noticed that when she served my hot fudge sundae.”

“Our sister didn’t bite anyone to death,” Violet said indignantly, a word which here means “in defense of an innocent baby.” “Detective Dupin is lying!”

“It’s not cool to accuse me of lying,” Dupin replied. “Instead of accusing other people of things, why don’t you three children tell us where you were last night?”

“We were at Hector’s house,” Klaus said. “He’ll tell you himself.” The middle Baudelaire stood up on tiptoe and called out over the crowd. “Hector! Tell everyone that we were with you!”

The citizens looked this way and that, the crow hats of the Elders bobbing as they listened for a word from Hector. But no word came. The three children waited for a moment in the tense silence, thinking that surely Hector would overcome his skittishness in order to save them. But the handyman was quiet. The only sounds the children could hear was the splashing of Fowl Fountain and the muttering of the roosting crows.

“Hector sometimes gets skittish in front of crowds,” Violet explained, “but it’s true. I spent the night working in his studio, and Klaus was reading in the secret library, and—”

“Enough nonsense!” Officer Luciana said. “Do you really expect us to believe that our fine handyman is building mechanical devices and has a secret library? Next I suppose you’ll say that he’s building things out of feathers!”

“It’s bad enough that you killed Count Olaf,” an Elder said, “but now you’re trying to frame Hector for other crimes! I say that V.F.D. no longer serve as guardian for such terrible orphans!”

“Hear, hear!” cried several voices scattered in the crowd, just as the children had planned to do themselves.

“I will send a message to Mr. Poe right away,” the Elder continued, “and the banker will come and remove them in a few days.”

“A few days is too long to wait!” Mrs. Morrow said, and several citizens cheered in agreement. “These children need to be taken care of as quickly as possible.”

“I say that we burn them at the stake!” cried Mr. Lesko, who stepped forward to wag his finger at the children. “Rule #201 clearly says no murdering!”

“But we didn’t murder anyone!” Violet cried. “A ribbon, a lens, and some bite marks aren’t enough evidence to accuse someone of murder!”

“It’s enough evidence for me!” an Elder cried. “We already have the torches—let’s burn them right now!”

“Hold on a moment,” another Elder said. “We can’t simply burn people at the stake whenever we want!” The Baudelaires looked at one another, relieved that one citizen seemed immune to mob psychology. “I have a very important appointment in ten minutes,” the Elder continued. “So it’s too late to do it now. How about tonight, after dinner?”

“That’s no good,” said another member of the Council. “I’m having a dinner party then. How about tomorrow afternoon?”

“Yes,” someone said from the crowd. “Right after lunch! That’s a perfect time!”

“Hear, hear!” Mr. Lesko cried.

“Hear, hear!” Mrs. Morrow cried.

“Glaji!” Sunny cried.

“Hector, help us!” Violet called. “Please tell these people that we’re not murderers!”

“I told you before,” Detective Dupin said, smiling beneath his sunglasses. “Only Sunny is a murderer. You two are accomplices, and I will put you all in jail where you belong.” Dupin grabbed Violet’s and Klaus’s wrists with one scraggly hand, and leaned down to scoop up Sunny with the other. “See you tomorrow afternoon for the burning at the stake!” he called out to the rest of the crowd, and dragged the struggling Baudelaires through the door of the uptown jail. The children stumbled into a dim, grim hallway, listening to the faint sounds of the mob cheering as the door slammed behind them.

“I’m putting you in the Deluxe Cell,” Dupin said. “It’s the dirtiest one.” He marched them down a dark hallway with many twists and turns, and the Baudelaires could see rows and rows of cells with their heavy doors hanging open. The only light in the jail came from tiny barred windows placed in each cell, but the children saw that every cell was empty and each one looked dirtier than the rest.

“You’ll be the one in jail before long, Olaf,” Klaus said, hoping he sounded much more certain than he felt. “You’ll never get away with this.”

“My name is Detective Dupin,” said Detective Dupin, “and my only concern is bringing you three criminals to justice.”

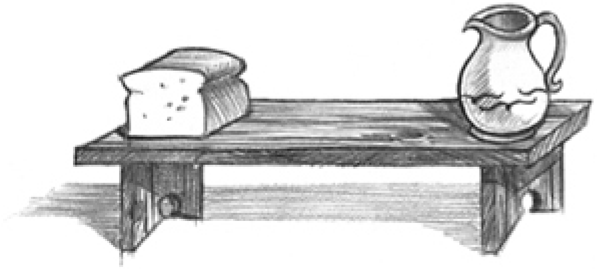
“But if you burn us at the stake,” Violet said quickly, “you’ll never get your hands on the Baudelaire fortune.”

Dupin rounded the last corner of the hallway, and pushed the Baudelaires into a small damp cell with only a small wooden bench as furniture. By the light of the barred window, the siblings could see that the cell was quite filthy, as Dupin had promised. The detective reached out to pull the door closed, but with his sunglasses on it was too dark to see the door handle, so he had to throw off all pretense—a phrase which here means “take off part of his disguise for a moment”—and remove his sunglasses. As much as the children hated Dupin’s ridiculous disguise, it was worse to see their enemy’s one eyebrow, and the shiny, shiny eyes that had been haunting them for so long.

“Don’t worry,” he said in his wheezy voice. “You won’t be burned at the stake—not all of you, at least. Tomorrow afternoon, one of you will make a miraculous escape—if you consider being smuggled out of V.F.D. by one of my assistants to be an escape. The other two will burn at the stake as planned. You bratty orphans are too stupid to realize it, but a genius like me knows that it may take a village to raise a child, but it only takes one child to inherit a fortune.” The villain laughed a loud and rude laugh, and began to shut the door of the cell. “But I don’t want to be cruel,” he said, smiling to indicate that he really wanted to be as cruel as possible. “I’ll let you three decide who gets the honor of spending the rest of their puny life with me, and who gets to burn at the stake. I’ll be back at lunchtime for your decision.”

The Baudelaire orphans listened to the wheezy giggle of their enemy as he slammed the cell door and walked back down the hallway in his plastic shoes, and felt a sinking feeling in their stomachs, where the huevos rancheros Hector had made for them last night were still being digested. When something is being digested, of course, it is getting smaller and smaller as the body uses up all of the nutrients inside the food, but it didn’t feel that way to the three children. The youngsters did not feel as if the small potatoes they had eaten for dinner were getting smaller. The Baudelaire orphans huddled together in the dim light and listened to the laughter echo against the walls of the uptown jail, and wondered just how large the potatoes of their lives would grow.

CHAPTER
Ten



Entertaining a notion, like entertaining a baby cousin or entertaining a pack of hyenas, is a dangerous thing to refuse to do. If you refuse to entertain a baby cousin, the baby cousin may get bored and entertain itself by wandering off and falling down a well. If you refuse to entertain a pack of hyenas, they may become restless and entertain themselves by devouring you. But if you refuse to entertain a notion—which is just a fancy way of saying that you refuse to think about a certain idea—you have to be much braver than someone who is merely facing some bloodthirsty animals, or some parents who are upset to find their little darling at the bottom of a well, because nobody knows what an idea will do when it goes off to entertain itself, particularly if the idea comes from a sinister villain.

“I don’t care what that horrible man says,” Violet said to her siblings as Detective Dupin’s plastic footsteps faded away. “We’re not going to choose which one of us will escape and who will be left to burn at the stake. I absolutely refuse to entertain the notion.”

“But what are we going to do?” Klaus asked. “Try to contact Mr. Poe?”

“Mr. Poe won’t help us,” Violet replied. “He’ll think we’re ruining the reputation of his bank. We’re going to escape.”

“Frulk!” Sunny said.

“I know it’s a jail cell,” Violet said, “but there must be some way to get out.” She pulled her ribbon out of her pocket and tied up her hair, her fingers shaking as she did so. The eldest Baudelaire had spoken confidently, but she did not feel as confident as she sounded. A cell is built for the specific purpose of keeping people inside, and she was not sure she could make an invention that could get the Baudelaires out of the uptown jail. But once her hair was out of her eyes, her inventing brain began to work at full force, and Violet took a good look around the cell for ideas. First she looked at the door of the cell, examining every inch of it.

“Do you think you could make another lock-pick?” Klaus asked hopefully. “You made an excellent one when we lived with Uncle Monty.”

“Not this time,” Violet replied. “The door locks from the outside, so a lockpick would be of no use.” She closed her eyes for a moment in thought, and then looked up at the tiny barred window. Her siblings followed her gaze, a phrase which here means “also looked at the window and tried to think of something helpful.”

“Boiklio?” Sunny asked, which meant “Do you think you could make some more welding torches, to melt the bars? You made some excellent ones when we lived with the Squalors.”

“Not this time,” Violet said. “If I stood on the bench and Klaus stood on my shoulders and you stood on Klaus’s shoulders, we could probably reach the window, but even if we melted the bars, the window isn’t big enough to crawl through, even for Sunny.”

“Sunny could call out the window,” Klaus said, “and try to attract the attention of someone to come and save us.”

“Thanks to mob psychology, every citizen of V.F.D. thinks that we’re criminals,” Violet pointed out. “No one is going to come rescue an accused murderer and her accomplices.” She closed her eyes and thought again, and then knelt down to get a closer look at the wooden bench.

“Rats,” she said.

Klaus jumped slightly. “Where?” he said.

“I don’t mean there are rats in the cell,” she said, hoping that she was speaking the truth. “I just mean ‘Rats!’ I was hoping that the bench would be made of wooden boards held together with screws or nails. Screws and nails are always handy for inventions. But it’s just a solid, carved piece of wood, which isn’t handy at all.” Violet sat down on the solid, carved piece of wood and sighed. “I don’t know what I can do,” she admitted.

Klaus and Sunny looked at one another nervously. “I’m sure you’ll think of something,” Klaus said.

“Maybe *you’ll* think of something,” Violet replied, looking at her brother. “There must be something you’ve read that could help us.”

It was Klaus’s turn to close his eyes in thought. “If you tilted the bench,” he said, after a pause, “it would become a ramp. The ancient Egyptians used ramps to build the pyramids.”

“But we’re not trying to build a pyramid!” Violet cried in exasperation. “We’re trying to escape from jail!”

“I’m just trying to be helpful!” Klaus cried. “If it weren’t for you and your silly hair ribbons, we wouldn’t have been arrested in the first place!”

“And if it weren’t for your ridiculous glasses,” Violet snapped in reply, “we wouldn’t be here in this jail!”

“Stop!” Sunny shrieked.

Violet and Klaus glared angrily at one another for a moment, and then sighed. Violet moved over on the bench to make room for her siblings.

“Come and sit down,” she said gloomily. “I’m sorry I yelled at you, Klaus. Of course it’s not your fault that we’re here.”

“It’s not yours, either,” Klaus said. “I’m just frustrated. Only a few hours ago we thought we’d be able to find the Quagmires and save Jacques.”

“But we were too late to save Jacques,” Violet said, shuddering. “I don’t know who he was, or how he got his tattoo, but I know he wasn’t Count Olaf.”

“Maybe he used to work with Count Olaf,” Klaus said. “He said the tattoo was from his job. Do you think Jacques was in Olaf’s theater troupe?”

“I don’t think so,” Violet said. “None of Olaf’s associates have that same tattoo. If only Jacques were alive, he could solve the mystery.”

“Pereg,” Sunny said, which meant “And if only the Quagmires were here, they could solve the other mystery—the meaning of the real V.F.D.”

“What we need,” Klaus said, “is deus ex machina.”

“Who’s that?” Violet said.

“It’s not a who,” Klaus said, “it’s a what. ‘Deus ex machina’ is a Latin term that means ‘the god from the machine.’ It means the arrival of something helpful when you least expect it. We need to rescue two triplets from the clutches of a villain, and solve the sinister mystery surrounding us, but we’re trapped in the filthiest cell of the uptown jail, and tomorrow afternoon we’re supposed to be burned at the stake. It would be a wonderful time for something helpful to arrive unexpectedly.”

At that moment there was a knock on the door, and the sound of the lock unlatching. The heavy door of the Deluxe Cell creaked open, and there stood Officer Luciana, scowling at them from beneath the visor of her helmet and holding a loaf of bread in one hand and a pitcher of water in the other. “If it were up to me, I wouldn’t be doing this,” she said, “but Rule #141 clearly states that all prisoners receive bread and water, so here you go.” The Chief of Police thrust the loaf and the pitcher into Violet’s hands and slammed the door shut, locking it behind her. Violet stared at the loaf of bread, which looked spongy and unappetizing, and at the water pitcher, which was decorated with a painting of seven crows flying in a circle. “Well, at least we have some nourishment,” she said. “Our brains need food and water to work properly.”

She handed the pitcher to Sunny and the loaf to Klaus, who looked at the bread for a long, long time. Then, he turned to his sisters, who could see that his eyes were filling up with tears.

“I just remembered,” he said, in a quiet, sad voice. “It’s my birthday. I’m thirteen today.”

Violet put her hand on her brother’s shoulder. “Oh, Klaus,” she said. “It *is* your birthday. We forgot all about it.”

“I forgot all about it myself, until this very moment,” Klaus said, looking back at the loaf of bread. “Something about this bread made me remember my twelfth birthday, when our parents made that bread pudding.”

Violet put the pitcher of water down on the floor, and sat beside Klaus. “I remember,” she said, smiling. “That was the worst dessert we ever tasted.”

“Vom,” Sunny agreed.

“It was a new recipe that they were trying out,” Klaus said. “They wanted it to be special for my birthday, but it was burned and sour and soggy. And they promised that the next year, for my thirteenth birthday, I’d have the best birthday meal in the world.” He looked at his siblings, and had to take his glasses off to wipe away his tears. “I don’t mean to sound spoiled,” he said, “but I was hoping for a better birthday meal than bread and water in the Deluxe Cell of the uptown jail in the Village of Fowl Devotees.”

“Chift,” Sunny said, biting Klaus’s hand gently.

Violet hugged him, and felt her own eyes fill up with tears as well. “Sunny’s right, Klaus. You don’t sound spoiled.”

The Baudelaires sat together for a moment and cried quietly, entertaining the notion of how dreadful their lives had become in such a short time. Klaus’s twelfth birthday did not seem like such a long time ago, and yet their memories of the lousy bread pudding seemed as faint and blurry as their first sight of V.F.D. on the horizon. It was a curious feeling, that something could be so close and so distant at the same time, and the children wept for their mother and their father and all of the happy things in their life that had been taken away from them since that terrible day at the beach.

Finally, the children cried themselves out, and Violet wiped her eyes and struggled to give her brother a smile. “Klaus,” she said, “Sunny and I are prepared to offer you the birthday gift of your choice. Anything at all that you want in the Deluxe Cell, you can have.”

“Thanks a lot,” Klaus said, smiling as he looked around the filthy room. “What I’d really like is deus ex machina.”

“Me, too,” Violet agreed, and took the pitcher of water from her sister to drink from it. Before she even took a sip, however, she looked up, and stared at the far end of the cell. Putting down the pitcher, she quickly walked to the wall and rubbed some dirt away to see what the wall was made of. Then looked at her siblings and began to smile. “Happy birthday, Klaus,” she said. “Officer Luciana brought us deus ex machina.”

“She didn’t bring us a god in a machine,” Klaus said. “She brought water in a pitcher.”

“Brioche!” Sunny said, which meant “And bread!”

“They’re the closest thing to a god in a machine that we’re going to get,” Violet said. “Now get up, both of you. We need the bench—it’ll be handy after all. It’s going to work as a ramp, just as Klaus said.”

Violet placed the loaf of bread up against the wall, directly under the barred window, and then tilted the bench toward the same spot. “We’re going to pour the pitcher of water so it runs down the bench, and hits the wall,” she said. “Then it’ll run down the wall to the bread, which will act like a sponge and soak up the water. Then we’ll squeeze the bread so the water goes into the pitcher, and start over.”

“But what will that do?” Klaus asked.

“The walls of this cell are made of bricks,” Violet said, “with mortar between the bricks to keep them together. Mortar is a type of clay that hardens like glue, so a mortar-dissolver would loosen the bricks and allow us to escape. I think we can dissolve the mortar by pouring water on it.”

“But how?” Klaus asked. “The walls are so solid, and water is so gentle.”

“Water is one of the most powerful forces on earth,” Violet replied. “Ocean waves can wear away at cliffs made of stone.”

“Donax!” Sunny said, which meant something like, “But that takes years and years, and if we don’t escape, we’ll be burned at the stake tomorrow afternoon.”

“Then we’d better stop entertaining the notion, and start pouring the water,” Violet said. “We’ll have to keep it up all night if we want to dissolve the mortar. I’ll stand at this end, propping up the bench. Klaus, you stand next to me and pour the water. Sunny, you stand near the bread, and bring it back to me when it’s soaked up all the water. Ready?”

Klaus took the pitcher in his hands and held it up to the end of the bench. Sunny crawled over to the loaf of bread, which was only a little bit shorter than she was. “Ready!” the two younger Baudelaires said in unison, and together the three children began to operate Violet’s mortar-dissolver. The water ran down the bench and hit the wall, and then ran down the wall and was soaked up in the spongy bread. Sunny quickly brought the bread to Klaus, who squeezed it into the pitcher, and the entire process began again. At first, it seemed as if the Baudelaires were barking up the wrong tree, because the water seemed to have no more effect against the wall of the Deluxe Cell than a silk scarf would have against a charging rhinoceros, but it soon became clear that water—unlike a silk scarf—is indeed one of the most powerful forces on earth. By the time the Baudelaires heard the flapping of the V.F.D. crows as they flew in a circle before heading downtown for their afternoon roost, the mortar between the bricks was slightly mushy to the touch, and by the time the last few rays of the sun were shining through the tiny barred window, quite a bit of the mortar had actually begun to wear away.

"Grespo," Sunny said, which meant something like, "Quite a bit of the mortar has actually begun to wear away."

"That's good news," Klaus said. "If your invention saves our lives, Violet, it will be the best birthday present you've ever given me, including that book of Finnish poetry you bought me when I turned eight."

Violet yawned. "Speaking of poetry, why don't we talk about Isadora Quagmire's couplets? We still haven't figured out where the triplets are hidden, and besides, if we keep talking it'll be easier to stay awake."

"Good idea," Klaus said, and recited the poems from memory:

"*For sapphires we are held in here*.
Only you can end our fear.

Until dawn comes we cannot speak.
No words can come from this sad beak.

The first thing you read contains the clue:
An initial way to speak to you."

The Baudelaires listened to the poems and began to entertain every notion they could think of that might help them figure out what the couplets meant. Violet held the bench in place, but her mind was on why the first poem began "For sapphires we are held in here," when the Baudelaires already knew about the Quagmire fortune. Klaus poured the water out of the pitcher and let it run down to the wall, but his mind was on the part of the poem that said "The first thing you read contains the clue," and what exactly Isadora meant by "the clue." Sunny monitored the loaf of bread as it soaked up the water again and again, but her mind was on the last line of the last poem they had received, and what "An initial way to speak to you" could mean. The three Baudelaires operated Violet's invention until morning, discussing Isadora’s couplets the entire time, and although the children made quite a lot of progress dissolving the mortar in the cell wall, they made no progress figuring out Isadora’s poems.

“Water might be one of the most powerful forces on earth,” Violet said, as the children heard the first sounds of the V.F.D. crows arriving for their uptown roost, “but poetry might be the most confusing. We’ve talked and talked, and we still don’t know where the Quagmires are hiding.”

“We need another dose of deus ex machina,” Klaus said. “If something helpful doesn’t arrive soon, we won’t be able to rescue our friends, even if we do escape from this cell.”

“Psst!” came an unexpected voice from the window, startling the children so much that they almost dropped everything and wrecked the mortar-dissolver. The Baudelaires looked up and saw the faint shape of somebody’s face behind the bars of the window. “Psst! Baudelaires!” the voice whispered.

“Who is it?” Violet whispered back. “We can’t see you.”

“It’s Hector,” Hector whispered. “I’m supposed to be downtown doing the morning chores, but I sneaked over here instead.”

“Can you get us out of here?” Klaus whispered.

For a few seconds, the children heard nothing but the sounds of the V.F.D. crows muttering and splashing in Fowl Fountain. Then Hector sighed. “No,” he admitted. “Officer Luciana has the only key, and this jail is made of solid brick. I don’t think there’s a way I can get you out.”

“Dala?” Sunny asked.

“My sister means, did you tell the Council of Elders that we were with you the night Jacques was murdered, so we couldn’t have committed the crime?”

There was another pause. “No,” Hector said. “You know that the Council makes me too skittish to talk. I wanted to speak up for you when Detective Dupin was accusing you, but one look at those crow hats and I couldn’t open my mouth. But I thought of one thing I can do to help.”

Klaus put down the pitcher of water and felt the mortar on the far wall. Violet’s invention seemed to be working quite well, but there was still no guarantee that it would get them out of there before the mob of citizens arrived in the afternoon. “What’s that?” he asked Hector.

“I’m going to get the self-sustaining hot air mobile home ready to go,” he said. “I’ll wait at the barn all afternoon, and if you somehow manage to escape, you can float away with me.”

“O.K.,” Violet said, although she had been hoping for something a little more helpful from a fully grown adult. “We’re trying to break out of this cell right now, so maybe we’ll make it.”

“Well, if you’re breaking out now, I’d better go,” Hector said. “I don’t want to get in trouble. I just want to say that if you don’t make it and you are burned at the stake, it was very nice making your acquaintance. Oh—I almost forgot.”

Hector’s fingers reached through the bars and dropped a rolled scrap of paper down to the waiting Baudelaires. “It’s another couplet,” he said. “It doesn’t make sense to me, but maybe you’ll find it helpful. Good-bye, children. I do hope I see you later.”

“Good-bye, Hector,” Violet said glumly. “I hope so too.”

“’Bye,” Sunny muttered.

Hector waited for a second, expecting Klaus to say good-bye, but then walked off without another word, his footsteps fading into the sounds of the muttering, splashing crows. Violet and Sunny turned to look at their brother, surprised that he had not said good-bye, although Hector’s visit had been such a disappointment that they could understand if Klaus was too annoyed to be polite. But when they looked at the middle Baudelaire, he did not look annoyed. Klaus was looking at the latest couplet from Isadora, and in the growing light of the Deluxe Cell his sisters could see a wide grin on his face. Grinning is something you do when you are entertained in some way, such as reading a good book or watching someone you don’t care for spill orange soda all over himself. But there weren’t any books in the uptown jail, and the Baudelaires had been careful not to spill a drop of the water as they operated the mortar-dissolver, so the Baudelaire sisters knew that their brother was grinning for another reason. He was grinning because he was entertaining a notion, and as Klaus showed them the poem he was holding, Violet and Sunny had a very good idea of what notion it was.

CHAPTER
Eleven

Inside these letters, the eye will see
Nearby are your friends, and V.F.D.

"Isn't it marvelous?" Klaus said with a grin, as his sisters read the fourth couplet. "Isn't it absolutely superlative?" "Wibeon," Sunny said, which meant "It's more confusing than superlative—we still don't know where the Quagmires are."

"Yes we do," Klaus said, taking the other couplets out of his pocket.

"Think about all four poems in order, and you'll see what I mean."

For sapphires we are held in here.
Only you can end our fear.

Until dawn comes we cannot speak.
No words can come from this sad beak.

The first thing you read contains the clue:
An initial way to speak to you.

Inside these letters the eye will see
Nearby are your friends, and V.F.D.

"I think you're much better at analyzing poetry than I am," Violet said, and Sunny nodded in agreement. "This poem doesn't make it any clearer."

"But you're the one who first suggested the solution," Klaus said. "When we received the third poem, you thought that 'initial' meant 'initials,' like V.F.D."

"But you said that it probably meant 'first,'" Violet said. "The poems are the first way the Quagmires can speak to us from where they are hidden."

"I was wrong," Klaus admitted. "I've never been so happy to be wrong in my life. Isadora meant 'initials' all along. I didn't realize it until I read the part that said 'Inside these letters the eye will see.' She's hiding the location inside the poem, like Aunt Josephine hid her location inside her note, remember?"

"Of course I remember," Violet said, "but I still don't understand."

"'The first thing you read contains the clue,'" Klaus recited. "We thought that Isadora meant the first poem. But she meant the first *letter*. She couldn't tell us directly where she and her brother were hidden, in case someone else got the poems from the crows before we did, so she had to use a sort of code. If we look at the first letter of each line, and we can see the triplets' location."

"'For sapphires we are held in here.' That's F," Violet said. "'Only you can end our fear.' That's O."

"'Until dawn comes we cannot speak,'" Klaus said. "That's U. 'No words can come from this sad beak.' That's N."

"'The first thing you read contains the clue'—T," Violet said excitedly. "'An initial way to speak to you'—A."

"I! N!" Sunny cried triumphantly, and the three Baudelaires cried out the solution together: "FOUNTAIN!"

"Fowl Fountain!" Klaus said. "The Quagmires are right outside that window."

"But how can they be in the fountain?" Violet asked. "And how could Isadora give her poems to the V.F.D. crows?"

"We'll answer those questions," Klaus replied, "as soon as we get out of jail. We'd better get back to the mortar-dissolver before Detective Dupin comes back."

"Along with a whole town of people who want to burn us at the stake, thanks to mob psychology," Violet said with a shudder.

Sunny crawled over to the loaf of bread and placed her tiny hand against the wall. "Mush!" she cried, which meant something like, "The mortar is almost dissolved—just a little bit longer!"

Violet took the ribbon out of her hair and then retied it, which was something she did when she needed to rethink, a word which here means "Think even harder about the Baudelaire orphans' terrible situation." "I'm not sure we have even a little bit longer," she said, looking up at the window. "Look at how bright the sunlight is. The morning must be almost over."

“Then we should hurry,” Klaus said.

“No,” Violet corrected. “We should rethink. And I’ve been rethinking this bench. We can use it in another way, besides as a ramp. We can use it as a battering ram.”

“Honz?” Sunny asked.

“A battering ram is a large piece of wood or metal used to break down doors or walls,” Violet explained. “Military inventors used it in medieval times to break into walled cities, and we’re going to use it now, to break out of jail.” Violet picked up the bench so it was resting on her shoulder. “The bench should be pointing as evenly as possible,” she said. “Sunny, get on Klaus’s shoulders. If the two of you hold the other end together, I think this battering ram will work.”

Klaus and Sunny scrambled into the position Violet had suggested, and in a moment the siblings were ready to operate Violet’s latest invention. The two Baudelaire sisters had a firm hold on the wood, and Klaus had a firm hold on Sunny so she wouldn’t fall to the floor of the Deluxe Cell as they battered.

“Now,” Violet said, “let’s step back as far as we can, and at the count of three, run quickly toward the wall. Aim the battering ram for the spot where the mortar-dissolver was working. Ready? One, two, *three*!”

Thunk! The Baudelaires ran forward and smacked the bench against the wall as hard as they could. The battering ram made a noise so loud that it felt as if the entire jail would collapse, but they left only a small dent in a few of the bricks, as if the wall had been bruised slightly. “Again!” Violet commanded. “One, two, *three*!”

Thunk! Outside the children could hear a few crows flutter wildly, frightened by the noise. A few more bricks were bruised, and one had a long crack down the middle. “It’s working!” Klaus cried. “The battering ram is working!”

“One, two, *minga*!” Sunny shrieked, and the children smacked the battering ram against the wall again.

“Ow!” Klaus cried, and stumbled a little bit, almost dropping his baby sister. “A brick fell on my toe!”

“Hooray!” Violet cried. “I mean, sorry about your toe, Klaus, but if bricks are falling it means the wall is definitely weakening. Let’s put down the battering ram and get a better look.”

“We don’t need a better look,” Klaus said. “We’ll know it’s working when we see Fowl Fountain. One, two, *three*!”

Thunk! The Baudelaires heard the sound of more pieces of brick hitting the filthy floor of the Deluxe Cell. But they also heard another sound—a familiar one. It began with a faint rustling, and then grew and grew until it sounded like a million pages were being flipped. It was the sound of the V.F.D. crows, flying in circles before departing for their afternoon roost, and it meant that the children were running out of time.

“Hurol!” Sunny cried desperately, and then, as loudly as she could, “One! Two! *Minga*!”

At the count of “Minga!” which of course meant something along the lines of “Three!” the children raced toward the wall of the Deluxe Cell and smacked their battering ram against the bricks with the mightiest *Thunk*! yet, a noise that was accompanied by an enormous cracking sound as the invention snapped in two. Violet staggered in one direction, and Klaus and Sunny staggered in another, as each separate half made them lose their balance, and a huge cloud of dust sprang from the point where the battering ram had hit the wall.

A huge cloud of dust is not a beautiful thing to look at. Very few painters have done portraits of huge clouds of dust or included them in their landscapes or still lifes. Film directors rarely choose huge clouds of dust to play the lead roles in romantic comedies, and as far as my research has shown, a huge cloud of dust has never placed higher than twenty-fifth in a beauty pageant. Nevertheless, as the Baudelaire orphans stumbled around the cell, dropping each half of the battering ram and listening to the sound of the crows flying in circles outside, they stared at the huge cloud of dust as if it were a thing of great beauty, because this particular huge dust cloud was made of pieces of brick and mortar and other building materials that are needed to build a wall, and the Baudelaires knew that they were seeing it because Violet's invention had worked. As the huge cloud of dust settled on the cell floor, making it even dirtier, the children gazed around them with big dusty grins on their faces, because they saw an additional beautiful sight —a big, gaping hole in the wall of the Deluxe Cell, perfect for a speedy escape.

"We did it!" Violet said, and stepped through the hole in the cell into the courtyard. She looked up at the sky just in time to see the last few crows departing for the downtown district. "We escaped!"

Klaus, still holding Sunny on his shoulders, paused to wipe the dust off his glasses before stepping out of the cell and walking past Violet to Fowl Fountain. "We're not out of the woods yet," he said, using a phrase which here means "There's still plenty of trouble on the horizon." He looked up at the sky and pointed to the distant blur of the departing crows. "The crows are heading downtown for their afternoon roost. The townspeople should arrive any minute now."

"But how can we get the Quagmires out any minute now?" Violet asked.

"Wock!" Sunny cried from Klaus's shoulders. She meant something like, "The fountain looks as solid as can be," and her siblings nodded in disappointed agreement. Fowl Fountain looked as impenetrable—a word which here means "impossible to break into and rescue kidnapped triplets"—as it did ugly. The metal crow sat and spat water all over itself as if the idea of the Baudelaires rescuing the Quagmires made it sick to its stomach.

"Duncan and Isadora must be trapped inside the fountain," Klaus said. "Perhaps there's a mechanism someplace that opens up a secret entrance."

“But we cleaned every inch of this fountain for our afternoon chores,” Violet said. “We would have noticed a secret mechanism while we were scrubbing all those carved feathers.”

“Jidu!” Sunny said, which meant something like, “Surely Isadora has given us a hint about how to rescue her!”

Klaus put down his baby sister, and took the four scraps of paper out of his pocket. “It’s time to rethink again,” he said, spreading out the couplets on the ground. “We need to examine these poems as closely as we can. There must be another clue about getting into the fountain.”

For sapphires we are held in here.
Only you can end our fear.

Until dawn comes we cannot speak.
No words can come from this sad beak.

The first thing you read contains the clue:
An initial way to speak to you.

Inside these letters the eye will see.
Nearby are your friends, and V.F.D.

“‘*This sad beak*’!” Violet exclaimed. “We jumped to the conclusion that she meant the V.F.D. crows, but maybe she means Fowl Fountain. The water comes out of the crow’s beak, so there must be a hole there.”

“We’d better climb up and see,” Klaus said. “Here, Sunny, get on my shoulders again, and then I’ll get on Violet’s shoulders. We’re going to have to be very tall to reach all the way up there.”

Violet nodded, and knelt at the base of the fountain. Klaus put Sunny back on his shoulders, and then got on the shoulders of his older sister, and then carefully, carefully, Violet stood up, so all three Baudelaires were balancing on top of one another like a troupe of acrobats the children had seen once when their parents had taken them to the circus. The key difference, however, is that acrobats rehearse their routines over and over, in rooms with safety nets and plenty of cushions so that when they make a mistake they will not injure themselves, but the Baudelaire orphans had no time to rehearse, or to find cushions to lay out on V.F.D.'s streets. As a result, the Baudelaire balancing act was a wobbly one. Violet wobbled from holding up both her siblings, and Klaus wobbled from standing on his wobbling sister, and poor Sunny was wobbling so much that she was just barely able to sit up on Klaus's shoulder and peer into the beak of the gargling metal crow. Violet looked down the street, to watch for any arriving townspeople, and Klaus gazed down at the ground, where Isadora's poems were still spread out.

"What do you see, Sunny?" asked Violet, who had spotted a few very distant figures walking quickly toward the fountain.

"Shize!" Sunny called down.

"Klaus, the beak isn't big enough to get inside the fountain," Violet said desperately. The streets of the town appeared to be shaking up and down as she wobbled more and more. "What can we do?"

"'Inside these letters the eye will see,'" Klaus muttered to himself, as he often did when he was thinking hard about something he was reading. It took all of his concentration to read the couplets Isadora had sent them while he was teetering back and forth. "That's a strange way to put it. Why didn't she write 'Inside these letters I hope you'll see,' or 'Inside these letters you just might see'?"

"Sabisho!" Sunny cried. From the top of her two wobbling siblings, Sunny was waving back and forth like a flower in the breeze. She tried to hang on to Fowl Fountain, but the water rushing out of the crow's beak made the metal too slippery.

Violet tried as hard as she could to steady herself, but the sight of two figures wearing crow-shaped hats coming around a nearby corner did not help her find her balance. “Klaus,” she said, “I don’t mean to rush you, but please rethink as quickly as you can. The citizens are approaching, and I’m not sure how much longer I can hang on.”

“‘Inside these letters the eye will see,’” Klaus muttered again, closing his eyes so he wouldn’t have to see the world wobbling around him.

“Took!” Sunny shrieked, but no one heard her over Violet’s scream as her legs gave out, a phrase which here means that she toppled to the ground, skinning her knee and dropping Klaus in the process. Klaus’s glasses dropped off, and he fell to the ground of the courtyard elbows first, which is a painful way to fall, and as he rolled on the ground both of his elbows received nasty scrapes. But Klaus was far more concerned about his hands, which were no longer clasping the feet of his baby sister. “Sunny!” he called, squinting without his glasses. “Sunny, where are you?”

“Heni!” Sunny screamed, but it was even more difficult than usual to understand what she meant. The youngest Baudelaire had managed to cling to the beak of the crow with her teeth, but as the fountain kept spitting out water, her mouth began to slip off the slick metal surface. “Heni!” she screamed again, as one of her upper teeth started to slip. Sunny began to slide down, down, scrambling desperately to find something to hang on to, but the only other feature carved into the head was the staring eye of the crow, which was flat and provided no sort of toothhold. She slipped down farther, farther, and Sunny closed her eyes rather than watch herself fall.

“Heni!” she screamed one last time, gnashing her teeth against the eye in frustration, and as she bit the eye, it depressed. “Depressed” is a word that often describes someone who is feeling sad and gloomy, but in this case it describes a secret button, hidden in a crow statue, that is feeling just fine, thank you. With a great creaking noise, the button depressed and the beak of Fowl Fountain opened as wide as it could, each part of the beak flipping slowly down and bringing Sunny down with it. Klaus found his glasses and put them on just in time to see his little sister drop safely into Violet’s outstretched arms. The three Baudelaires looked at one another with relief, and then looked at the widening beak of the crow. Through the rushing water, the three siblings could see two pairs of hands appear on the beak as two people climbed out of Fowl Fountain. Each person was wearing a thick wool sweater, so dark and heavy with water that they both looked like huge, misshapen monsters. The two dripping figures climbed carefully out of the crow and lowered themselves to the ground, and the Baudelaires ran to clasp them in their arms.

I do not have to tell you how overjoyed the children were to see Duncan and Isadora Quagmire shivering in the courtyard, and I do not have to tell you how grateful the Quagmires were to be out of the confines of Fowl Fountain. I do not have to tell you how happy and relieved the five youngsters were to be reunited after all this time, and I do not have to tell you all the joyous things the triplets said as they struggled to take off their heavy sweaters and wring them out. But there are things I do have to tell you, and one of those things is the distant figure of Detective Dupin, holding a torch and heading straight toward the Baudelaire orphans.

CHAPTER
Twelve

If you have reached this far in the story, you must stop now. If you take one step back and look at the book you are reading, you can see how little of this miserable story there is to go, but if you could know how much grief and woe are contained in these last few pages, you would take another step back, and then another, and keep stepping back until *The Vile Village* was just as small and distant as the approaching figure of Detective Dupin was as the Baudelaire orphans embraced their friends in relief and joy. The Baudelaire orphans, I'm sorry to say, could not stop now, and there is no way for me to travel backward in time and warn the Baudelaires that the relief and joy they were experiencing at Fowl Fountain were the last bits of relief and joy they would experience for a very long time. But I can warn you. You, unlike the Baudelaire orphans and the Quagmire triplets and me and my dear departed Beatrice, can stop this wretched story at this very moment, and see what happens at the end of *The Littlest Elf* instead.

"We can't stay here," Violet warned. "I don't mean to cut short this reunion, but it's already afternoon, and Detective Dupin is coming down that street."

The five children looked in the direction Violet was pointing, and could see the turquoise speck of Dupin’s approaching blazer, and the tiny point of light his flaming torch made as he drew near the courtyard.

“Do you think he sees us?” Klaus asked.

“I don’t know,” Violet said, “but let’s not stick around to find out. The V.F.D. mob will only get worse when they discover we’ve broken out of jail.”

“Detective Dupin is the latest disguise of Count Olaf,” Klaus explained to the Quagmires, “and—”

“We know all about Detective Dupin,” Duncan said quickly, “and we know what’s happened to you.”

“We heard everything that happened yesterday, from inside the fountain,” Isadora said. “When we heard you cleaning the fountain we tried to make as much noise as we could, but you couldn’t hear *us* over the sound of all that water.”

Duncan squeezed a whole puddle out of the soaked stitches of his left sweater sleeve. Then he reached under his shirt and brought out a dark green notebook. “We tried to keep our notebooks as dry as possible,” he explained. “After all, there’s crucial information in here.”

“We have all the information about V.F.D.,” Isadora said, taking out her notebook, which was pitch black. “The real V.F.D., that is, not the Village of Fowl Devotees.”

Duncan opened his notebook and blew on some of the damp pages. “And we know the complete story of poor Jac—”

Duncan was interrupted by a shriek behind him, and the five children turned to see two members of the Council of Elders staring at the hole in the uptown jail. Quickly, the Baudelaires and Quagmires ducked behind Fowl Fountain so they wouldn’t be seen.

One of the Elders shrieked again, and removed his crow hat to dab at his brow with a tissue. “They’ve escaped!” he cried. “Rule #1,742 clearly states that no one is allowed to escape from jail. How dare they disobey this rule!”

“We should have expected this from a murderer and her two accomplices,” the other Elder said. “And look—they’ve damaged Fowl Fountain. The beak is split wide open. Our beautiful fountain is ruined!”

“Those three orphans are the worst criminals in history,” the first replied. “Look—there’s Detective Dupin, walking down that street. Let’s go tell him what’s happened. Maybe he’ll figure out where they’ve gone.”

“You go tell Dupin,” the second Elder said, “and I’ll go call *The Daily Punctilio*. Maybe they’ll put my name in the newspaper.”

The two members of the Council hurried off to spread the news, and the children sighed in relief. “Cose,” Sunny said.

“That was *too* close,” Klaus replied. “Soon this whole district will be full of citizens hunting us down.”

“Well, nobody’s hunting *us*,” Duncan said. “Isadora and I will walk in front of you, so you won’t be spotted.”

“But where can we go?” Isadora asked. “This vile village is in the middle of nowhere.”

“I helped Hector finish his self-sustaining hot air mobile home,” Violet said, “and he promised to have it waiting for us. All we have to do is make it to the outskirts of town, and we can escape.”

“And live forever up in the air?” Klaus said, frowning.

“Maybe it won’t be forever,” Violet replied.

“Scylla!” Sunny said, which meant “It’s either the self-sustaining hot air mobile home, or being burned at the stake!”

“When you say it like that,” Klaus said, “I’m convinced.”

Everyone agreed, and Violet looked around the courtyard to see if anyone else had arrived yet. “In a place as flat as this one,” she said, “you can see people coming from far away, and we’re going to use that to our advantage. We’ll walk along any empty street we can find, and if we see anyone coming, we’ll turn a corner. We won’t be able to get there as the crow flies, but eventually we’ll be able to reach Nevermore Tree.”

“Speaking of the crows,” Klaus said to the two triplets, “how did you manage to deliver those poems by crow? And how did you know that we would receive them?”

“Let’s get moving,” Isadora replied. “We’ll tell you the whole story as we go along.”

The five children got moving. With the Quagmire triplets in the lead, the group of youngsters peered down one street after another until they found one without a sign of anyone coming, and hurried out of the courtyard.

“Olaf smuggled us away in that item from the In Auction with the help of Esmé Squalor,” Duncan began, referring to the last time the Baudelaires had seen him and his sister. “And he hid us for a while in the tower room of his terrible house.”

Violet shuddered. “I haven’t thought of that room in quite some time,” she said. “It’s hard to believe that we used to live with such a vile man.”

Klaus pointed to the distant figure who was walking toward them, and the five children turned onto another empty street. “This street doesn’t lead to Hector’s house,” he said, “but we’ll try to double back. Go on, Duncan.”

“Olaf learned that you three would be living with Hector at the outskirts of this town,” Duncan continued, “and he had his associates build that hideous fountain.”

“Then he placed us inside,” Isadora said, “and had us installed in the uptown courtyard, so he could keep an eye on us while he tried to hunt you down. We knew that you were our only chance of escaping.”

The children reached a corner and stopped, while Duncan peeked around it to make sure no one was approaching. He signaled that it was safe, and continued the story. “We needed to send you a message, but we were afraid it would fall into the wrong hands. Isadora had the idea of writing in couplets, with our location hidden in the first letter of each line.”

“And Duncan figured out how to get them to Hector’s house,” Isadora said. “He’d done some research about migration patterns in large black birds, so he knew that the crows would roost every night in Nevermore Tree—right next to Hector’s house. Every morning, I would write a couplet, and the two of us would reach up through the fountain’s beak.”

“There was always a crow roosting on the very top of the fountain,” Duncan said, “so we would wrap the scrap of paper around its leg. The paper was all wet from the fountain, so it would stick easily.”

“*And Duncan’s research was absolutely right.*
The paper dried off, and fell at night.”

Isadora recited.

“That was a risky plan,” Violet said.

“No riskier than breaking out of jail, and putting your lives in danger to rescue us,” Duncan said, and looked at the Baudelaires in gratitude. “You saved our lives—again.”

“We wouldn’t leave you behind,” Klaus said. “We refused to entertain the notion.”

Isadora smiled, and patted Klaus’s hand. “Meanwhile,” she said, “while we were trying to contact you, Olaf hatched a plan to steal your fortune—and get rid of an old enemy at the same time.”

“You mean Jacques,” Violet said. “When we saw him with the Council of Elders, he was trying to tell us something. Why does he have the same tattoo as Olaf? Who is he?”

“His full name,” Duncan said, flipping through his notebook, “is Jacques Snicket.”

“That sounds familiar,” Violet said.

“I’m not surprised,” Duncan said. “Jacques Snicket is the brother of a man who—”

“There they are!” a voice cried, and in an instant the children realized they had neglected to look in back of them, as well as in front of them and around each corner. About two blocks behind them was Mr. Lesko, leading a small group of torch-carrying citizens straight up the street. The day was getting later, and the torches left long, skinny shadows on the sidewalk as if the mob were being led by slithering black serpents, instead of a man in plaid pants. “There are the orphans!” Mr. Lesko cried triumphantly. “After them, citizens!”

“Who are those other two?” asked an Elder in the crowd.

“Who cares?” said Mrs. Morrow, and waved her torch. “They’re probably more accomplices! Let’s burn them at the stake, too!”

“Why not?” said another Elder. “We already have torches and kindling, and I don’t have anything else to do right now.”

Mr. Lesko stopped at a corner and called down a street the children couldn’t see. “Hey, everyone!” he shouted. “They’re over here!”

The five children had been staring at the group of citizens, too terrified to get moving again. Sunny was the first to recover. “Lililk!” she shouted, and began crawling down the street as fast as she could. She meant something like “Let’s go! Don’t look behind you! Let’s just try to get to Hector and his self-sustaining hot air mobile home before the mob catches up with us and burns us at the stake!” but her companions didn’t need any encouragement. Down the street they raced, paying no attention to the footsteps and shouts behind them, which seemed to be growing in number as more and more people heard the news that V.F.D.'s prisoners were escaping. The children ran down narrow alleys and wide main streets, across parks and bridges that were all covered in black feathers. Occasionally they had to retrace their steps, a phrase which here means "turn around and run the other way when they saw townspeople approaching," and often they had to duck into doorways or hide behind shrubbery while angry citizens ran by, as if the children were playing a game of hide-and-go-seek instead of running for their lives. The afternoon wore on, and the shadows on V.F.D.'s streets grew longer and longer, and still the sidewalks echoed with the sounds of the mob's cries and the windows of the buildings reflected the flames from the torches the townspeople were carrying. Finally, the five children reached the outskirts of town, and stared at the flat, bare landscape. The Baudelaires searched desperately for a sign of the handyman and his invention, but only the shapes of Hector's house, the barn, and Nevermore Tree were visible on the horizon.

"Where's Hector?" Isadora asked frantically.

"I don't know," Violet said. "He said he'd be at the barn, but I don't see him."

"Where can we go?" Duncan cried. "We can't hide anywhere around here. The citizens will spot us in a second."

"We're trapped," Klaus said, his voice hoarse with panic.

"Vireo!" Sunny cried, which meant "Let's run—or, in my case, crawl—as fast as we can!"

"We'll never run fast enough," Violet said, pointing behind them. "Look."

The youngsters turned around, and saw the entire Village of Fowl Devotees, marching together in a huge group. They had rounded the last corner and were now heading straight toward the five children, their footsteps as loud as a roll of thunder. But the youngsters did not feel as if it was thunder that was rolling toward them. As hundreds of fierce and angry citizens approached, it felt more like the rolling of an enormous root vegetable. It felt like a root vegetable that could crush all of the reptiles in Uncle Monty's collection in five seconds flat, or one that could soak up every drop of water of Lake Lachrymose in an instant. The approaching crowd felt like a root vegetable that made every tree in the Finite Forest look like a tiny twig, made the huge lasagna served at the Prufrock Preparatory School cafeteria look like a light snack, and made the skyscraper at 667 Dark Avenue look like a dollhouse made for midget children to play with, a root vegetable so tremendous in size that it would win every first-place ribbon in every starchy farm crop competition in every state and county fair in the entire world from now until the end of time. The march of the torch-wielding mob, eager to capture Violet and Klaus and Sunny and Duncan and Isadora and burn each one of them at the stake, felt like the largest potato the Baudelaire orphans and the Quagmire triplets had ever encountered.

CHAPTER Thirteen

The Baudelaires looked at the Quagmires, and the Quagmires looked at the Baudelaires, and then all five children looked at the mob. All the members of the Council of Elders were walking together, their crow-shaped hats bobbing in unison. Mrs. Morrow was leading a chant of “Burn the orphans! Burn the orphans!” which the Verhoogen family was taking up with spirit, and Mr. Lesko’s eyes were shining as brightly as his torch. The only person missing from the mob was Detective Dupin, who the children would have expected to be leading the crowd. Instead, Officer Luciana walked in front, scowling below the visor of her helmet as she led the way in her shiny black boots. In one white-gloved hand she was clutching something covered in a blanket, and with the other hand she was pointing at the terrified children.

“There they are!” Officer Luciana cried, pointing her white-gloved finger at the five terrified children. “They have nowhere else to go!”

“She’s right!” Klaus cried. “There’s no way to escape!”

“Machina!” Sunny shrieked.

“There’s no sign of deus ex machina, Sunny,” Violet said, her eyes filling with tears. “I don’t think anything helpful will arrive unexpectedly.”

“Machina!” Sunny insisted, and pointed at the sky. The children took their eyes off the approaching mob and looked up, and there was the greatest example of deus ex machina they had ever seen. Floating just over the children’s heads was the superlative sight of the self-sustaining hot air mobile home. Although the invention had been quite marvelous to look at in Hector’s studio, it was truly wondrous now that it was actually being put to use, and even the angry citizens of V.F.D. stopped chasing the children for a moment, just so they could stare at this amazing sight. The self-sustaining hot air mobile home was enormous, as if an entire cottage had somehow detached itself from its neighborhood and was wandering around the sky. The twelve baskets were all connected and floating together like a group of rafts, with all of the tubes, pipes, and wires twisted around them like a huge piece of knitting. Above the baskets were dozens of balloons in varying shades of green. Fully inflated, they looked like a floating crop of crisp, ripe apples glistening in the last light of the afternoon. The mechanical devices were working at full force, with flashing lights, spinning gears, ringing bells, dripping faucets, whirring pulleys, and a hundred other gadgets all going at once, but miraculously, the entire self-sustaining hot air mobile home was as silent as a cloud. As the invention sailed toward the ground, the only sound that could be heard was Hector’s triumphant shout.

“Here I am!” the handyman called from the control basket. “And here it is, like a bolt from the blue! Violet, your improvements are working perfectly. Climb aboard, and we’ll escape from this wretched place.” He flicked a bright yellow switch, and a long ladder made of rope began to unfurl down to where the children were standing. “Because my invention is self-sustaining,” he explained, “it isn’t designed to come back down to the ground, so you’ll have to climb up this ladder.”

Duncan caught the end of the ladder and held it for Isadora to climb up. “I’m Duncan Quagmire,” he said quickly, “and this is my sister, Isadora.”

“Yes, the Baudelaires have told me all about you,” Hector said. “I’m glad you’re coming along. Like all mechanical devices, the self-sustaining hot air mobile home actually needs several people to keep it running.”

“Aha!” cried Mr. Lesko, as Isadora hurriedly climbed the ladder with Duncan right behind her. The mob had stopped staring at the deus ex machina and was now marching once again toward the children. “I *knew* it was a mechanical device! All those buttons and gears can’t fool me!”

“Why, Hector!” an Elder said. “Rule #67 clearly states that no citizen is allowed to build or use any mechanical devices.”

“Burn him at the stake, too!” cried Mrs. Morrow. “Somebody get extra kindling!”

Hector took a deep breath, and then called down to the mob without a trace of skittishness in his voice. “Nobody’s going to be burned at the stake,” he said firmly, as Isadora reached the top of the ladder and joined Hector in the control basket. “Burning people at the stake is a repulsive thing to do!”

“What’s repulsive is your behavior,” an Elder replied. “The children have murdered Count Olaf, and you have built a mechanical device. You have both broken very important rules!”

“I don’t want to live in a place with so many rules,” Hector replied in a quiet voice, “or a place with so many crows. I’m floating away from here, and I’m taking these five children with me. The Baudelaires and the Quagmires have had a horrible time since their parents died. The Village of Fowl Devotees ought to be taking care of them, instead of accusing them of things and chasing them through the streets.”

“But who’s going to do our chores?” an Elder asked. “The Snack Hut is still full of dirty dishes from our hot fudge sundaes.”

“You should do your own chores,” the handyman said, as he leaned over to lift Duncan aboard his invention, “or take turns doing them according to a fair schedule. The aphorism is ‘It takes a village to raise a child,’ not

‘Three children should clean up after a village.’ Baudelaires, climb aboard. Let’s leave these terrible people behind us.”

The Baudelaires smiled at one another, and began climbing up the rope ladder. Violet went first, her hands clutching the scratchy rope as tightly as she could, and Klaus and Sunny followed closely behind. Hector turned a knob, and the mobile home rose up higher just as the crowd reached the end of the ladder. “They’re getting away!” another Elder called, her crow-shaped hat bobbing with frustration. She jumped up to try to grab the edge of the ladder, but Hector had maneuvered his invention too high for her to reach. “The rulebreakers are getting away! Officer Luciana, do something!”

“I’ll do something, all right,” Officer Luciana said with a snarl, and tossed away the blanket she had been holding. From halfway down the ladder, the three climbing Baudelaires looked down and saw a large, wicked-looking object in Luciana’s hands, with a bright red trigger and four long, sharp hooks. “You’re not the only one with a mechanical device!” she called up to Hector. “This is a harpoon gun that my boyfriend bought for me. It fires four hooked harpoons, which are long spears perfect for popping balloons.”

“Oh no!” Hector said, looking down at the climbing children.

“Raise the self-sustaining hot air mobile home, Hector!” Violet called. “We’ll keep climbing!”

“Our Chief of Police is using a mechanical device?” Mrs. Morrow asked in astonishment. “That means she’s breaking Rule #67, too.”

“Officers of the law are allowed to break rules,” Luciana said, aiming the harpoon gun in Hector’s direction. “Besides, this is an emergency. We need to get those murderers down from there.” Members of the mob looked at one another in confusion, but Luciana merely gave them a lipsticked smile, and pressed the harpoon gun’s trigger with a sharp *click*! followed by a *swoosh*! as one of the hooked harpoons flew out of the gun straight toward Hector’s invention. The handyman managed to manuever the self-sustaining hot air mobile home so the harpoon did not hit a balloon, but it struck a metal tank on the side of one of the baskets, making a large hole.

“Drat!” Hector said, as a purplish liquid began to pour out of the hole. “That’s my supply of cranberry juice! Baudelaires, hurry up! If she causes any serious damage, we’re all doomed!”

“We’re coming as fast as we can!” Klaus cried, but as Hector moved his invention even higher in the air, the rope ladder was shaking so much that the Baudelaires could not move very fast at all.

Click! Swoosh! Another harpoon flew through the air and landed in the sixth basket, sending a cloud of brown dust fluttering to the ground, followed by some thin metal tubes. “She hit our supply of whole wheat flour,” Hector cried, “and our box of extra batteries!”

“I’ll hit a balloon with this one!” Officer Luciana called. “Then you’ll fall to the ground, where we can burn you at the stake!”

“Officer Luciana,” said one of the Council of Elders in the crowd, “I don’t think you should break the rules in order to capture people who have broken the rules. It doesn’t make sense.”

“Hear, hear!” called out a townsperson from the opposite side of the crowd. “Why don’t you put down the harpoon gun, and we’ll walk over to Town Hall and have a council meeting.”

“It’s not cool,” called out a voice, “to have meetings!” There was a rumble, as if another large potato had arrived, and the crowd parted to reveal Detective Dupin, riding through the mob on a motorcycle painted turquoise to match his blazer. Below his sunglasses was a grin of triumph, and his bare chest swelled with pride.

“Detective Dupin is using a mechanical device too?” an Elder asked. “We can’t burn everyone at the stake!”

“Dupin isn’t a citizen,” another member of the Council pointed out, “so he’s not breaking Rule #67.”

“But he’s riding through a crowd of people,” Mr. Lesko said, “and he’s not wearing a helmet. He’s not showing good judgment, that’s for sure.”

Detective Dupin ignored Mr. Lesko’s lecture about motorcycle safety and pulled to a stop beside Officer Luciana. “It’s cool to be late,” he said, and snapped his fingers. “I was buying today’s edition of *The Daily Punctilio*.”

“You shouldn’t be buying newspapers,” said an Elder, shaking his crow hat in disapproval. “You should be catching criminals.”

“Hear, hear!” said several voices in agreement, but the crowd was beginning to look uncertain. It is hard work to be fierce all afternoon, and as the situation grew more complicated, the citizens of V.F.D. seemed a bit less bloodthirsty. A few townspeople even lowered their torches, which had been heavy to hold up all this time.

But Detective Dupin ignored this change in V.F.D.’s mob psychology. “Leave me alone, you crow-hatted fool,” he said to the Elder, and snapped his fingers. “It’s cool to fire away, Officer Luciana.”

“It certainly is,” Luciana said, and looked up into the sky to aim the harpoon gun again. But the self-sustaining hot air mobile home was no longer alone in the sky. In all the commotion, no one had noticed that the afternoon was over, and the V.F.D. crows had left their downtown roost to fly in circles before migrating to Nevermore Tree to spend the night as usual. Now the crows were arriving, thousands and thousands of them, and in seconds the evening sky was covered in black, muttering birds. Officer Luciana could not see Hector and his invention. Hector could not see the Baudelaires. And the Baudelaires could not see anything. The rope ladder was right in the path of the migrating crows, and the three children were absolutely surrounded by the birds of V.F.D. The wings of the crows rustled against the children, and their feathers became tangled in the ladder, and all the three siblings could do was hang on for dear life.

“Baudelaires!” Hector called down. “Hang on for dear life! I’m going to fly even higher, over the crows!”

“No!” Sunny cried, which meant something like, “I’m not sure that’s the wisest plan—we won’t survive a fall from such a height!” but Hector couldn’t hear her over another *click*! and *swoosh*! from Luciana’s harpoon gun. The Baudelaires felt the rope ladder jerk sharply in their hands, and then twist dizzily in the crow-filled air. From up in the control basket, the Quagmire triplets looked down and caught a glimpse, through the migrating crows, of some very bad news.

“The harpoon hit the ladder!” Isadora called down to her friends in despair. “The rope is coming unraveled!”

It was true. As the crows began to settle in at Nevermore Tree, the Baudelaires could see more clearly, and they stared up at the ladder in horror. The harpoon was sticking out of one of the ladder’s thick ropes, which was slowly uncurling around the hook. It reminded Violet of a time when she was much younger, and had begged her mother to braid her hair so she could look like a famous inventor she had seen in a magazine. Despite her mother’s best efforts, the braids had not held their shape, and had come unraveled almost as soon as she had tied their ends with ribbons. Violet’s hair had slowly spun out of the braid, just as the strands of rope were spinning out of the ladder now.

“Climb faster!” Duncan screamed down. “Climb faster!”

“No,” Violet said quietly, and then said it again so her siblings could hear. More and more crows were taking their places in the tree, and Klaus and Sunny could see Violet’s grim face as she looked down at them in despair. “No.” The eldest Baudelaire took another look at the unraveling rope and saw that they couldn’t possibly climb up to the basket of Hector’s self-sustaining hot air mobile home. It was just as impossible as her mother ever braiding her hair again. “We can’t do it,” she said. “If we keep trying to climb up, we’ll fall to our deaths. We have to climb down.”

“But—” Klaus said.

“No,” Violet said, and one tear rolled down her cheek. “We won’t make it, Klaus.”

“Yoil!” Sunny said.

“No,” Violet said again, and looked her siblings in the eye. The three Baudelaires shared a moment of frustration and despair that they could not follow their friends, and then, without another word, they began climbing down the unraveling ladder, through the murder of crows still migrating to Nevermore Tree. When the Baudelaires climbed down nine rungs, the rope unbraided completely and dropped the children onto the flat landscape, unhappy but unharmed.

“Hector, maneuver your invention back down!” Isadora called. Her voice sounded a bit faint from so far away. “Duncan and I can lean out of the basket and make a human ladder! There’s still time to retrieve them!”

“I can’t,” Hector said sadly, gazing down at the Baudelaires, who were standing up and untangling themselves from the fallen ladder, as Detective Dupin began to stride toward them in his plastic shoes. “It’s not designed to return to the ground.”

“There must be a way!” Duncan cried, but the self-sustaining hot air mobile home only floated farther away.

“We could try to climb Nevermore Tree,” Klaus said, “and jump into the control basket from its highest branches.”

Violet shook her head. “The tree is already half covered in crows,” she said, “and Hector’s invention is flying too high.” She looked up in the sky and cupped her hands to her mouth so her voice could travel all the way up to her friends. “We can’t reach you now!” she cried. “We’ll try to catch up with you later!”

Isadora’s voice came back so faintly that the Baudelaires could scarcely hear it over the muttering of the crows, who were still settling themselves in Nevermore Tree. “How can you catch up with us later,” she called, “in the middle of the air?”

“I don’t know!” Violet admitted. “But we’ll find a way, I promise you!”

“In the meantime,” Duncan called back, “take these!” The Baudelaires could see the triplet holding his dark green notebook, and Isadora holding hers, over the side of the basket. “This is all the information we have about Count Olaf’s evil plan, and the secret of V.F.D., and Jacques Snicket’s murder!” His voice was as trembly as it was faint, and the three siblings knew their friend was crying. “It’s the least we can do!” he called.

“Take our notebooks, Baudelaires!” Isadora called, “and maybe someday we’ll meet again!”

The Quagmire triplets dropped their notebooks out of the self-sustaining hot air mobile home, and called out “Good-bye!” to the Baudelaires, but their farewell was drowned out by the sound of another *click*! and another *swoosh*! as Officer Luciana fired one last harpoon. After so much practice, I’m sorry to say, her aim had improved, and the hook hit exactly what Luciana hoped it would. The sharp spear sailed through the air and hit not one but both Quagmire notebooks. There was a loud ripping noise, and then the air was filled with sheets of paper, tossing this way and that in the rustling wind made by the flying crows. The Quagmires yelled in frustration, and called one last thing down to their friends, but Hector’s invention had flown too high for the Baudelaires to hear it all. “… volunteer…” the children heard dimly, and then the self-sustaining hot air balloon floated too high for the orphans to hear anything more.

“Tesper!” Sunny cried, which meant “Let’s try to gather up as many pages of the notebooks as we can!”

“If ‘Tesper’ means ‘All is lost,’ then that baby isn’t so stupid after all,” said Detective Dupin, who had reached the Baudelaires. He opened his blazer, exposing more of his pale and hairy chest, and took a rolled-up newspaper out of an inside pocket, looking down at the children as if they were three bugs he was about to squash. “I thought you’d want to see *The Daily Punctilio*,” he said and unrolled the newspaper to show them the headline. “BAUDELAIRE ORPHANS AT LARGE!” it read, using a phrase which here means “not in jail.” Below the headline were three drawings, one of each sibling’s face.

Detective Dupin removed his sunglasses so he could read the newspaper in the fading light. “Authorities are trying to capture Veronica, Klyde, and Susie Baudelaire,” he read out loud, “who escaped from the uptown jail of the Village of Fowl Devotees, where they were imprisoned for the murder of Count Omar." He gave the children a nasty smile and threw *The Daily Punctilio* down on the ground. "Some names are wrong, of course," he said, "but everybody makes mistakes. Tomorrow, of course, there will be another special edition, and I'll make sure that *The Daily Punctilio* gets every detail correct in the story about Detective Dupin's supercool capture of the notorious Baudelaires."

Dupin leaned down to the children, so close that they could smell the egg salad sandwich he'd apparently eaten for lunch. "Of course," he said, in a quiet voice so only the siblings could hear him, "one Baudelaire will escape at the last minute, and live with me until the fortune is mine. The question is, which Baudelaire will that be? You still haven't let me know your decision."

"We're not going to entertain that notion, Olaf," Violet said bitterly.

"Oh no!" an Elder cried, and pointed out at the flat horizon. By the light of the sunset, the Baudelaires could see a small, slender shape sticking out of the ground, while the Quagmire pages fluttered by. It was the last harpoon Luciana had fired, and it had hit something else after destroying the Quagmire notebooks. There, pinned to the ground, was one of the V.F.D. crows, opening its mouth in pain.

"You harmed a crow!" Mrs. Morrow said in horror, pointing at Officer Luciana. "That's Rule #1! That's the most important rule of all!"

"Oh, it's just a stupid bird," Detective Dupin said, turning to face the horrified citizens.

"A stupid bird?" an Elder repeated, his crow hat trembling in anger. "*A stupid bird*? Detective Dupin, this is the Village of Fowl Devotees, and—"

"Wait a minute!" interrupted a voice from the crowd. "Look, everyone! He has only one eyebrow!"

Detective Dupin, who had removed his sunglasses to read the paper, reached into the pocket of his blazer and put them back on again. "Lots of people have one eyebrow," he said, but the crowd paid no attention as mob psychology began to take hold again.

"Let's make him take off his shoes," Mr. Lesko called, and an Elder knelt down to grab one of Dupin's feet. "If he has a tattoo, let's burn him at the stake!"

"Hear, hear!" a group of citizens agreed.

"Now, wait just a minute!" Officer Luciana said, putting down the harpoon gun and looking at Dupin in concern.

"And let's burn Officer Luciana, too!" Mrs. Morrow said. "She wounded a crow!"

"We don't want all these torches to go to waste!" cried an Elder.

"Hear, hear!"

Detective Dupin opened his mouth to speak, and the children could see he was thinking frantically of something to say that would fool V.F.D.'s citizens. But then he simply closed his mouth, and with a flick of his foot, kicked the Elder who was holding on to his shoe. As the mob gasped, the Elder's crow-shaped hat fell off as she rolled to the ground, still clutching Dupin's plastic shoe.

"It's the tattoo!" one of the Verhoogens cried, pointing at the eye on Detective Dupin's—or, more properly, Count Olaf's—left ankle. With a roar, Olaf ran back to his motorcycle and, with another roar, he started the engine. "Hop aboard, Esmé!" he called out to Officer Luciana. The Chief removed her motorcycle helmet with a smile, and the Baudelaires saw that it was indeed Esmé Squalor.

"It's Esmé Squalor!" an Elder cried. "She used to be the city's sixth most successful financial advisor, but now she works with Count Olaf!"

"I heard the two of them are dating!" Mrs. Morrow said in horror.

“We *are* dating!” Esmé cried in triumph. She climbed aboard Olaf’s motorcycle and tossed her helmet to the ground, showing that she cared no more about motorcycle safety than she did about the welfare of crows.

“So long, Baudelaires!” Count Olaf called, zooming through the angry crowd. “I’ll find you again, if the authorities don’t find you first!”

Esmé cackled as the motorcycle roared off across the flat landscape at more than twice the legal speed limit, so within moments the motorcycle was as tiny a speck on the horizon as the self-sustaining hot air mobile home was in the sky. The mob stared after the two villains in disappointment.

“We’ll never catch up to them,” an Elder said with a frown. “Not without any mechanical devices.”

“Never mind about that,” another Elder replied. “We have more important things to attend to. Hurry, everyone! Rush this crow to the V.F.D. vet!”

The Baudelaires looked at one another in astonishment as the citizens of V.F.D. carefully unpinned the crow and began to carry it back into town. “What should we do?” Violet asked. She was talking to her siblings, but a member of the Council of Elders overheard and turned back to answer her. “Stay right here,” he said. “Count Olaf and that dishonest girlfriend of his may have escaped, but you three are still criminals. We’ll burn you at the stake as soon as this crow has received proper medical attention.”

The Elder ran after the crow-carrying mob, and in a few seconds the children were alone on the flat landscape with only the shuffling papers of the Quagmire notebooks for company. “Let’s gather these up,” Klaus said, stooping down to pick up one badly ripped page. “They’re our only hope of discovering the secret of V.F.D.”

“And of defeating Count Olaf,” Violet agreed, walking over to where a small stack of pages had blown together.

“Phelon!” Sunny said, scrambling after one that seemed to have a map scrawled on it. She meant “And of proving that we’re not murderers!” and the children paused to look at *The Daily Punctilio*, which still lay on the ground. Their own faces stared back at them, below the headline “BAUDELAIRE ORPHANS AT LARGE!” but the children did not feel at large. The Baudelaires felt as small as could be, standing alone on the bare outskirts of V.F.D., chasing down the few pages of the Quagmire notebooks that were not gone forever. Violet managed to grab six pages, and Klaus managed to grab seven, and Sunny managed to grab nine, but many of the recovered pages were ripped, or blank, or all crumpled from the wind.

“We’ll study them later,” Violet said, gathering the pages together and tying them in a bundle with her hair ribbon. “In the meantime, we have to get out of here before the mob returns.”

“But where will we go?” Klaus asked.

“Burb,” Sunny said, which meant “Anywhere, as long as it’s out of town.”

“Who will take care of us out there?” Klaus said, looking out on the flat horizon.

“Nobody,” Violet said. “We’ll have to take care of ourselves. We’ll have to be self-sustaining.”

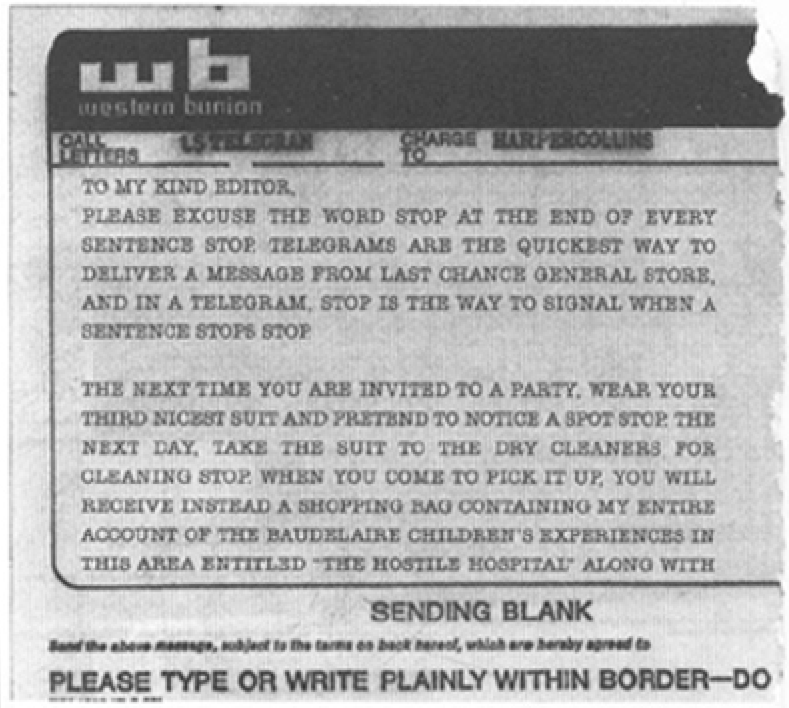
“Like the hot air mobile home,” Klaus said, “that could travel and survive all by itself.”

“Like me,” Sunny said, and abruptly stood up. Violet and Klaus gasped in surprise as their baby sister took her first wobbly steps, and then walked closely beside her, ready to catch her if she fell.

But she didn’t fall. Sunny took a few more self-sustaining steps, and then the three Baudelaires stood together, casting long shadows across the horizon in the dying light of the sunset. They looked up to see a tiny dot in the sky, far far away, where the Quagmire triplets would live in safety with Hector. They looked out at the landscape, where Count Olaf had ridden off with Esmé Squalor, to find his associates and cook up another scheme. They looked back at Nevermore Tree, where the V.F.D. crows were muttering together for their evening roost, and then they looked out at the world, where families everywhere would soon be reading all about the three siblings in the special edition of *The Daily Punctilio*. It seemed to the Baudelaires that every creature in the world was being taken care of by others—every creature except for themselves.

But the children, of course, could care for one another, as they had been caring for one another since that terrible day at the beach. Violet, Klaus, and Sunny looked at one another and took a deep breath, gathering up all their courage to face all the bolts from the blue that they guessed—and, I'm sorry to say, guessed correctly—lay ahead of them, and then the self-sustaining Baudelaire orphans took their first steps away from town and toward the last few rays of the setting sun.

To My Kind Editor



western bunion

CALL LETTERS LS TELEGRAM

CHARGE TO HARPERCOLLINS

TO MY KIND EDITOR,

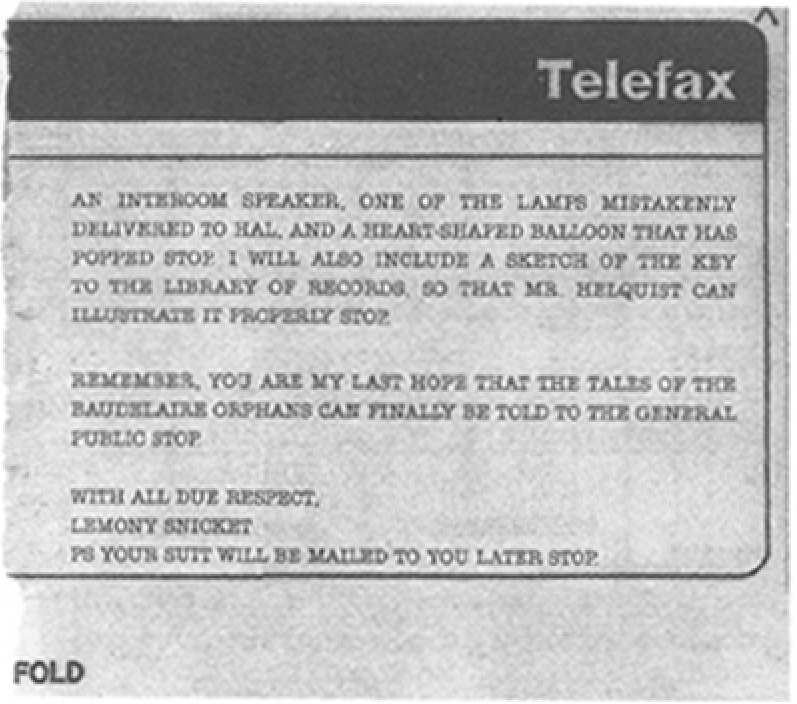
PLEASE EXCUSE THE WORD STOP AT THE END OF EVERY SENTENCE STOP. TELEGRAMS ARE THE QUICKEST WAY TO DELIVER A MESSAGE FROM LAST CHANCE GENERAL STORE, AND IN A TELEGRAM, STOP IS THE WAY TO SIGNAL WHEN A SENTENCE STOPS STOP.

THE NEXT TIME YOU ARE INVITED TO A PARTY, WEAR YOUR THIRD NICEST SUIT AND PRETEND TO NOTICE A SPOT STOP. THE NEXT DAY, TAKE THE SUIT TO THE DRY CLEANERS FOR CLEANING STOP. WHEN YOU COME TO PICK IT UP, YOU WILL RECEIVE INSTEAD A SHOPPING BAG CONTAINING MY ENTIRE ACCOUNT OF THE BAUDELAIRE CHILDREN'S EXPERIENCES IN THIS AREA ENTITLED "THE HOSTILE HOSPITAL" ALONG WITH

SENDING BLANK

Send the above message, subject to the terms on back hereof, which are hereby agreed to

PLEASE TYPE OR WRITE PLAINLY WITHIN BORDER—DO



Telefax

AN INTERROOM SPEAKER, ONE OF THE LAMPS MISTAKENLY DELIVERED TO HAL, AND A HEART-SHAPED BALLOON THAT HAS POPPED STOP. I WILL ALSO INCLUDE A SKETCH OF THE KEY TO THE LIBRARY OF RECORDS, SO THAT MR. HELQUIST CAN ILLUSTRATE IT PROPERLY STOP.

REMEMBER, YOU ARE MY LAST HOPE THAT THE TALES OF THE BAUDELAIRE ORPHANS CAN FINALLY BE TOLD TO THE GENERAL PUBLIC STOP.

WITH ALL DUE RESPECT,
LEMONY SNICKET
PS YOUR SUIT WILL BE MAILED TO YOU LATER STOP.

FOLD

A Series of Unfortunate Events

THE BAD BEGINNING

THE REPTILE ROOM

THE WIDE WINDOW

THE MISERABLE MILL

THE AUSTERE ACADEMY

THE ERSATZ ELEVATOR

THE VILE VILLAGE

Credits

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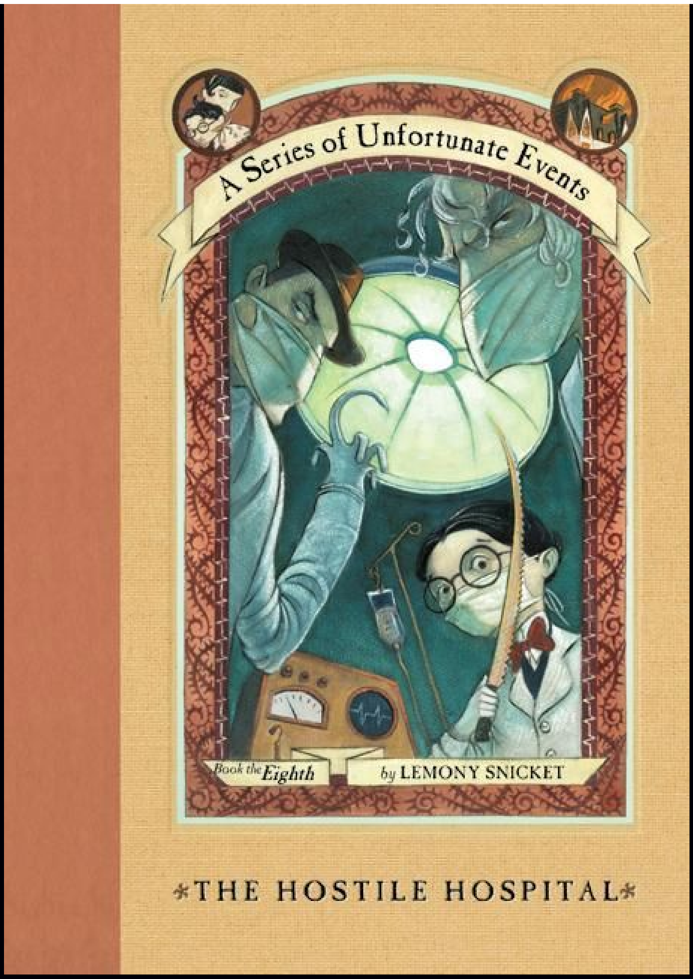
A Series of Unfortunate Events #8: The Hostile Hospital


A Series of Unfortunate Events
Book the Eighth
by LEMONY SNICKET
THE HOSTILE HOSPITAL

A Series of Unfortunate Events

BOOK the Eighth

THE HOSTILE HOSPITAL

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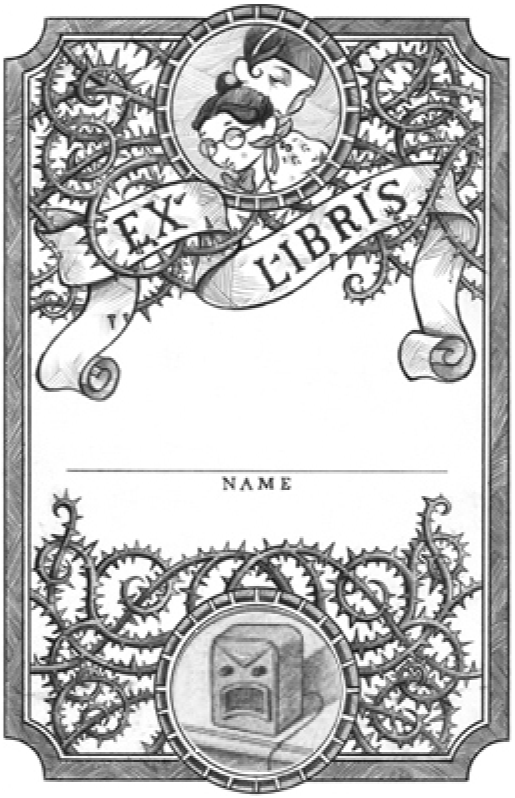

EX LIBRIS
NAME

***Dear Reader*,**

Before you throw this awful book to the ground and run as far away from it as possible, you should probably know why. This book is the only one which describes every last detail of the Baudelaire children�s miserable stay at Heimlich Hospital, which makes it one of the most dreadful books in the world.

There are many pleasant things to read about, but this book contains none of them. Within its pages are such burdensome details as a suspicious shopkeeper, unnecessary surgery, an intercom system, anesthesia, heart-shaped balloons, and some very startling news about a fire. Clearly you do not want to read about such things.

I have sworn to research this story, and to write it down as best I can, so I should know that this book is something best left on the ground, where you undoubtedly found it.

With all due respect,

Lemony Snicket

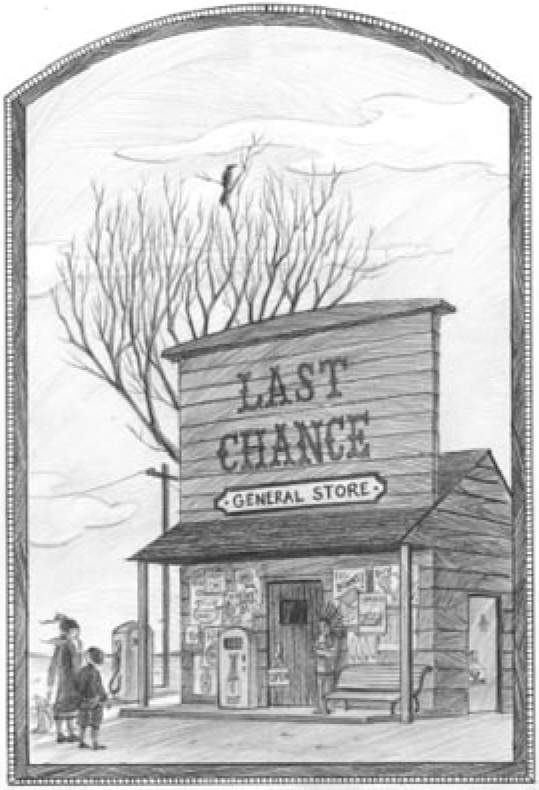
Lemony Snicket

A Series of Unfortunate Events * LEMONY SNICKET *

For Beatrice—

Summer without you is as cold as winter.

Winter without you is even colder.


LAST CHANCE
GENERAL STORE

CHAPTER
One

There are two reasons why a writer would end a sentence with the word "stop" written entirely in capital letters STOP. The first is if the writer were writing a telegram, which is a coded message sent through an electrical wire STOP. In a telegram, the word "stop" in all capital letters is the code for the end of a sentence STOP. But there is another reason why a writer would end a sentence with "stop" written entirely in capital letters, and that is to warn readers that the book they are reading is so utterly wretched that if they have begun reading it, the best thing to do would be to stop STOP. This particular book, for instance, describes an especially unhappy time in the dreadful lives of Violet, Klaus, and Sunny Baudelaire, and if you have any sense at all you will shut this book immediately, drag it up a tall mountain, and throw it off the very top STOP. There is no earthly reason why you should read even one more word about the misfortune, treachery, and woe that are in store for the three Baudelaire children, any more than you should run into the street and throw yourself under the wheels of a bus STOP. This "stop"-ended sentence is your very last chance to pretend the "STOP" warning is a stop sign, and to stop the flood of despair that awaits you in this book, the heart-stopping horror that begins in the very next sentence, by obeying the "STOP" and stopping STOP.

The Baudelaire orphans stopped. It was early in the morning, and the three children had been walking for hours across the flat and unfamiliar landscape. They were thirsty, lost, and exhausted, which are three good reasons to end a long walk, but they were also frightened, desperate, and not far from people who wanted to hurt them, which are three good reasons to continue. The siblings had abandoned all conversation hours ago, saving every last bit of their energy to put one foot in front of the other, but now they knew they had to stop, if only for a moment, and talk about what to do next.

The children were standing in front of the Last Chance General Store—the only building they had encountered since they began their long and frantic nighttime walk. The outside of the store was covered with faded posters advertising what was sold, and by the eerie light of the half-moon, the Baudelaires could see that fresh limes, plastic knives, canned meat, white envelopes, mango-flavored candy, red wine, leather wallets, fashion magazines, goldfish bowls, sleeping bags, roasted figs, cardboard boxes, controversial vitamins, and many other things were available inside the store. Nowhere on the building, however, was there a poster advertising help, which is really what the Baudelaires needed.

"I think we should go inside," said Violet, taking a ribbon out of her pocket to tie up her hair. Violet, the eldest Baudelaire, was probably the finest fourteen-year-old inventor in the world, and she always tied her hair up in a ribbon when she had to solve a problem, and right now she was trying to invent a solution for the biggest problem she and her siblings had ever faced. "Perhaps there's somebody in there who can help us in some way."

"But perhaps there's somebody in there who has seen our pictures in the newspaper," said Klaus, the middle Baudelaire, who had recently spent his thirteenth birthday in a filthy jail cell. Klaus had a real knack for remembering nearly every word of nearly all of the thousands of books he had read, and he frowned as he remembered something untrue he had recently read about himself in the newspaper. "If they read *The Daily Punctilio,*" he continued, "perhaps they believe all those terrible things about us. Then they won't help us at all."

"Agery!" Sunny said. Sunny was a baby, and as with most babies, different parts of her were growing at different rates. She had only four teeth, for example, but each of them was as sharp as that of an adult lion, and although she had recently learned to walk, Sunny was still getting the hang of speaking in a way that all adults could understand. Her siblings, however, knew at once that she meant “Well, we can’t keep on walking forever,” and the two older Baudelaires nodded in agreement.

“Sunny’s right,” Violet said. “It’s called the Last Chance General Store. That sounds like it’s the only building for miles and miles. It might be our only opportunity to get some help.”

“And look,” Klaus said, pointing to a poster taped in a high corner of the building. “We can send a telegram inside. Maybe we can get some help that way.”

“Who would we send a telegram to?” Violet asked, and once again the Baudelaires had to stop and think. If you are like most people, you have an assortment of friends and family you can call upon in times of trouble. For instance, if you woke up in the middle of the night and saw a masked woman trying to crawl through your bedroom window, you might call your mother or father to help you push her back out. If you found yourself hopelessly lost in the middle of a strange city, you might ask the police to give you a ride home. And if you were an author locked in an Italian restaurant that was slowly filling up with water, you might call upon your acquaintances in the locksmith, pasta, and sponge businesses to come and rescue you. But the Baudelaire children’s trouble had begun with the news that their parents had been killed in a terrible fire, so they could not call upon their mother or father. The siblings could not call upon the police for assistance, because the police were among the people who had been chasing them all night long. And they could not call upon their acquaintances, because so many of the children’s acquaintances were unable to help them. After the death of the Baudelaire parents, Violet, Klaus, and Sunny had found themselves under the care of a variety of guardians. Some of them had been cruel. Some of them had been murdered. And one of them had been Count Olaf, a greedy and treacherous villain who was the real reason they were all by themselves in the middle of the night, standing in front of the Last Chance General Store, wondering who in the world they could call upon for help.

“Poe,” Sunny said finally. She was talking about Mr. Poe, a banker with a nasty cough, who was in charge of taking care of the children following their parents’ death. Mr. Poe had never been particularly helpful, but he was not cruel, murdered, or Count Olaf, and those seemed to be reasons enough to contact him.

“I guess we could try Mr. Poe,” Klaus agreed. “The worst he could do would be to say no.”

“Or cough,” Violet said with a small smile. Her siblings smiled back, and the three children pushed open the rusty door and walked inside.

“Lou, is that you?” called out a voice, but the children could not see who it belonged to. The inside of the Last Chance General Store was as crowded as its outside, with every inch of space crammed full of things for sale. There were shelves of canned asparagus and racks of fountain pens, next to barrels of onions and crates full of peacock feathers. There were cooking utensils nailed to the walls and chandeliers hanging from the ceiling, and the floor was made out of thousands of different kinds of tiles, each one stamped with a price tag. “Are you delivering the morning paper?” the voice asked.

“No,” Violet replied, as the Baudelaires tried to make their way toward the person who was talking. With difficulty they stepped over a carton of cat food and rounded a corner, only to find rows and rows of fishnets blocking their way.

“I’m not surprised, Lou,” the voice continued, as the siblings doubled back past a stack of mirrors and a pile of socks and headed down an aisle filled with pots of ivy and books of matches. “I usually don’t expect *The Daily Punctilio* until after the Volunteers Fighting Disease arrive.”

The children stopped looking for the source of the voice for a moment, and looked at one another, thinking of their friends Duncan and Isadora Quagmire. Duncan and Isadora were two triplets who, like the Baudelaires, had lost their parents, along with their brother, Quigley, in a terrible fire. The Quagmires had fallen into Olaf’s hands a couple of times and had only recently escaped, but the Baudelaires did not know if they would see their friends ever again or learn a secret that the triplets had discovered and written down in their notebooks. The secret concerned the initials V.F.D., but the only other clues that the Baudelaires had were a few pages from Duncan's and Isadora's notebooks, and the three siblings had scarcely found the time to look them over. Could Volunteers Fighting Disease finally be the answer the children were searching for?

"No, we're not Lou," Violet called out. "We're three children, and we need to send a telegram."

"A telegram?" called the voice, and as the children rounded another corner they almost ran right into the man who was talking to them. He was very short, shorter than both Violet and Klaus, and looked like he hadn't slept or shaved in quite a long time. He was wearing two different shoes, each with a price tag, and several shirts and hats at once. He was so covered in merchandise that he almost looked like part of the store, except for his friendly smile and dirty fingernails.

"You're certainly not Lou," he said. "Lou is one chubby man, and you are three skinny children. What are you doing around here so early? It's dangerous around here, you know. I've heard that this morning's *Daily Punctilio* has a story about three murderers who are lurking around this very neighborhood, but I haven't read it yet."

"Newspaper stories aren't always accurate," Klaus said nervously.

The shopkeeper frowned. "Nonsense," he said. "*The Daily Punctilio* wouldn't print things that aren't true. If the newspaper says somebody is a murderer, then they are a murderer and that's the end of it. Now, you say you wanted to send a telegram?"

"Yes," Violet said. "To Mr. Poe at Mulctuary Money Management, in the city."

"It will cost quite a bit of money to send a telegram all the way to the city," the shopkeeper said, and the Baudelaires looked at one another in dismay.

“We don’t have any money with us,” Klaus admitted. “We’re three orphans, and the only money we have is being looked after by Mr. Poe. Please, sir.”

“Sos!” Sunny said.

“My sister means ‘It’s an emergency situation,’” Violet explained, “and it is.”

The shopkeeper looked at them for a moment, and then shrugged. “If it’s really an emergency situation,” he said, “then I won’t charge you. I never charge anything for things if they’re really important. Volunteers Fighting Disease, for instance. Whenever they stop by, I give them gasoline for free because they do such wonderful work.”

“What exactly do they do?” Violet asked.

“They fight disease, of course,” the shopkeeper replied. “V.F.D. stop by here early each morning on their way to the hospital. Every day they devote themselves to cheering up patients, and I don’t have the heart to charge them for anything.”

“You’re a very kind man,” Klaus replied.

“Well, it’s very kind of you to say so,” the shopkeeper replied. “Now, the device for sending telegrams is over there, next to all those porcelain kittens. I’ll help you.”

“We can do it ourselves,” Violet said. “I built one of those devices myself when I was seven, so I know how to connect the electronic circuit.”

“And I’ve read two books about Morse code,” Klaus said. “So I can translate our message into electronic signals.”

“Help!” Sunny said.

“What a talented group of children,” the shopkeeper said with a smile. “Well, I’ll leave you three alone. I hope that this Mr. Poe person can help you with your emergency situation.”

“Thank you very much, sir,” Violet said. “I hope so, too.”

The shopkeeper gave the children a little wave and disappeared behind a display of potato peelers, and the Baudelaires looked at one another in excitement.

“Volunteers Fighting Disease?” Klaus whispered to Violet. “Do you think we’ve finally found the real meaning of V.F.D.?”

“Jacques!” Sunny said.

“Jacques did say something about working as a volunteer,” Klaus agreed. “If only we had a few moments to look over the pages from the Quagmire notebooks. They’re still in my pocket.”

“First things first,” Violet said. “Let’s send the telegram to Mr. Poe. If Lou delivers this morning’s *Daily Punctilio*, the shopkeeper is going to stop thinking we’re a group of talented children and start thinking we’re murderers.”

“You’re right,” Klaus said. “After Mr. Poe gets us out of this mess, we’ll have time to think about these other things.”

“Trosslik,” Sunny said. She meant something along the lines of, “You mean *if* Mr. Poe gets us out of this mess,” and her siblings nodded grimly and went over to take a look at the telegram device. It was an arrangement of dials, wires, and strange metal implements that I would have been too scared to even touch, but the Baudelaires approached it with confidence.

“I’m pretty sure we can operate this,” Violet said. “It looks fairly simple. See, Klaus, you use these two metal strips to tap out the message in Morse code, and I will connect the circuit over here. Sunny, you stand here and put on these earphones to make sure you can hear the signal being transmitted. Let’s step to it.”

The children stepped to it, a phrase which here means “took their positions around the telegram device.” Violet turned a dial, Sunny put on her earphones, and Klaus wiped the lenses of his glasses so he could be sure to see what he was doing. The siblings nodded at one another, and Klaus began to speak out loud as he tapped out the message in code.

“To: Mr. Poe at Mulctuary Money Management,” Klaus said. “From: Violet, Klaus, and Sunny Baudelaire. Please do not believe the story about us printed in *The Daily Punctilio* STOP. Count Olaf is not really dead, and we did not really murder him STOP.”

“Arrete?” Sunny asked.

“‘STOP’ is the code for the end of a sentence,” Klaus explained. “Now, what should I say next?”

“Soon after our arrival in the town of V.F.D. we were informed that Count Olaf had been captured STOP,” Violet dictated. “Although the arrested man had an eye tattooed on his ankle and one eyebrow instead of two, he was not Count Olaf STOP. His name was Jacques Snicket STOP.”

“The next day he was found murdered, and Count Olaf arrived in town along with his girlfriend, Esmé Squalor STOP,” Klaus continued, tapping away. “As part of his plan to steal the fortune our parents left behind, Count Olaf disguised himself as a detective and convinced the town of V.F.D. that we were the murderers STOP.”

“Uckner,” Sunny suggested, and Klaus translated what she said into English, and then into Morse code: “Meanwhile we discovered where the Quagmire triplets were being hidden, and helped them escape STOP. The Quagmires managed to give us a few scraps of their notebooks so we could try to learn the real meaning of V.F.D. STOP.”

“We have managed to flee from the citizens of the town, who want to burn us at the stake for a murder that we did not commit STOP,” Violet said, and Klaus quickly tapped the sentence out into code before adding two last sentences of his own.

“Please reply at once STOP. We are in grave danger STOP.”

Klaus tapped out the last P in “STOP” and then looked at his sisters. “We are in grave danger,” he said again, although his hand did not move on the device.

“You already sent that sentence,” Violet said.

“I know,” Klaus said quietly. “I wasn’t putting it into the telegram again. I was just saying it. We are in grave danger. It’s almost as if I didn’t realize how grave the danger was until I tapped it out into a telegram.”

“Ilimi,” Sunny said, and took off her earphones so she could lay her head on Klaus’s shoulder.

“I’m scared, too,” Violet admitted, patting her sister’s shoulder. “But I’m sure Mr. Poe will help us. We can’t be expected to solve this problem all by ourselves.”

“But that’s how we’ve solved every other problem,” Klaus said, “ever since the fire. Mr. Poe has never done anything except send us to one disastrous home after another.”

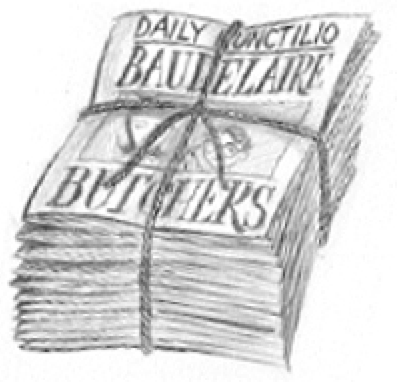
“He’ll help us this time,” Violet insisted, although she did not sound very sure. “Just watch the device. He’ll send back a telegram any moment now.”

“But what if he doesn’t?” Klaus asked.

“Chonex,” Sunny murmured, and wriggled closer to her siblings. She meant something along the lines of “Then we’re all alone,” which is a curious thing to say when you are with your two siblings, in the middle of a store so stuffed with merchandise you can hardly move. But as they sat closely together, looking at the telegram device, it did not seem curious to the Baudelaires. They were surrounded by nylon rope, floor wax, soup bowls, window curtains, wooden rocking horses, top hats, fiber-optic cable, pink lipstick, dried apricots, magnifying glasses, black umbrellas, slender paintbrushes, French horns, and each other, but as the Baudelaire orphans sat and waited for a reply to their telegram, they only felt more and more alone.

CHAPTER
Two

Of all the ridiculous expressions people use—and people use a great many ridiculous expressions—one of the most ridiculous is “No news is good news.” “No news is good news” simply means that if you don’t hear from someone, everything is probably fine, and you can see at once why this expression makes such little sense, because everything being fine is only one of many, many reasons why someone may not contact you. Perhaps they are tied up. Maybe they are surrounded by fierce weasels, or perhaps they are wedged tightly between two refrigerators and cannot get themselves out. The expression might well be changed to “No news is bad news,” except that people may not be able to contact you because they have just been crowned king or are competing in a gymnastics tournament. The point is that there is no way to know why someone has not contacted you, until they contact you and explain themselves. For this reason, the sensible expression would be “No news is no news,” except that it is so obvious it is hardly an expression at all.



Obvious or not, however, it is the proper way to describe what happened to the Baudelaires after they sent the desperate telegram to Mr. Poe. Violet, Klaus, and Sunny sat and stared at the telegram device for hours, waiting for some sign of the banker's reply. As the hour grew later and later, they took turns dozing against the merchandise of the Last Chance General Store, hoping for any response from the man who was in charge of the orphans' affairs. And as the first few rays of dawn shone through the window, illuminating all of the price tags in the store, the only news the children had received was that the shopkeeper had made some fresh cranberry muffins.

"I've made some fresh cranberry muffins," the shopkeeper said, peeking around a tower of flour sifters. He was wearing at least two pot holders on each hand and was carrying the muffins on a stack of different-colored trays. "Normally I would put them up for sale, between the phonograph records and the garden rakes, but I hate to think of you three children going without breakfast when there are vicious murderers on the loose, so have some for yourself, free of charge."

"That's very kind of you," Violet said, as she and her siblings each took a muffin from the shopkeeper's top tray. The Baudelaires, who had not eaten since they left the village, soon made short work—a phrase which here means "ate every warm, sweet crumb"—of the pastries.

"Goodness, you're hungry," the shopkeeper said. "Did everything go all right with the telegram? Have you received a reply?"

"Not yet," Klaus said.

“Well, don’t worry your tiny heads about it,” the shopkeeper replied. “Remember, no news is good news.”

“No news is good news?” called out a voice from somewhere in the store. “I have some news for you, Milt. All about those murderers.”

“Lou!” the shopkeeper called in delight, and then turned to the children. “Excuse me, please,” he said. “Lou’s here with *The Daily Punctilio*.”

The shopkeeper walked through a bunch of rugs hanging from the ceiling, and the Baudelaires looked at one another in dismay.

“What’ll we do?” Klaus whispered to his sisters. “If the newspaper has arrived, the shopkeeper will read that we’re murderers. We’d better run away.”

“But if we run away,” Violet said, “Mr. Poe won’t be able to contact us.”

“Gykree!” Sunny cried, which meant “He’s had all night to contact us, and we haven’t heard from him.”

“Lou?” they heard the shopkeeper call out. “Where are you, Lou?”

“I’m over by the pepper grinders,” the deliveryperson called out in return. “And wait till you read this story about the three murderers of that Count. It’s got pictures and everything. I saw the police on the way here, and they said they were closing in. The only people they allowed in the area were me and those volunteer people. They’re going to capture those kids and send them right to jail.”

“Kids?” the shopkeeper said. “The murderers are kids?”

“Yep,” the deliveryperson replied. “See for yourself.”

The children looked at one another, and Sunny gave a little whimper of fear. Across the store they could hear the rustling of paper and then the excited voice of the shopkeeper.

“I know those kids!” he cried. “They’re in my store right now! I just gave them some muffins!”

“You gave muffins to murderers?” Lou said. “That’s not right, Milt. Criminals should be punished, not fed pastries.”

“I didn’t know they were murderers then,” the shopkeeper explained, “but I sure know now. It says so right here in *The Daily Punctilio.* Call the police, Lou! I’ll grab these murderers and make sure they don’t escape.”

The Baudelaires wasted no more time, and began to run in the opposite direction from the men’s voices, down an aisle of safety pins and candy canes. “Let’s head toward those ceramic ashtrays,” Violet whispered. “I think we can exit that way.”

“But what happens when we exit?” Klaus whispered back. “The deliveryperson said that the police were closing in.”

“Mulick!” Sunny cried, which meant “Let’s discuss that at a later time!”

“Egad!” The children could hear the shopkeeper’s surprised voice from several aisles over. “Lou, the kids aren’t here! Keep an eye out for them.”

“What do they look like?” the delivery-person called back.

“They look like three innocent children,” the shopkeeper said, “but they’re really vicious criminals. Be careful.”

The children ran around a corner and ducked into the next aisle, pressing themselves against a rack of construction paper and canned peas as they listened to the hurrying footsteps of the deliveryperson. “Wherever you murderers are,” he called, “you’d better give up!”

“We’re not murderers!” Violet cried in frustration.

“Of course you’re murderers!” the shopkeeper answered. “It says so in the newspaper!”

"Plus," the deliveryperson said in a sneering voice, "if you're not murderers, why are you hiding and running?"

Violet started to answer, but Klaus covered her mouth before she could say anything more. "They'll be able to tell where we are by our voices," he whispered. "Just let them talk, and maybe we can escape."

"Lou, do you see them?" called the shopkeeper.

"No, but they can't hide forever," the deliveryperson said. "I'm going to look over by the undershirts!"

The Baudelaires looked ahead of them and saw a pile of white undershirts that happened to be on sale. Gasping, the children doubled back, and ran down an aisle covered in ticking clocks.

"I'm going to try the clock aisle!" the shopkeeper cried. "They can't hide forever!"

The children hurried down the aisle, sprinted past a rack of towel racks and piggy banks, and scurried around a display of sensible plaid skirts. Finally, over the top shelf of an aisle containing nothing but different kinds of bedroom slippers, Violet spotted a glimpse of the exit, and silently pointed the way to her siblings.

"I bet they're in the sausage aisle!" the shopkeeper said.

"I bet they're near the bathtub display!" the deliveryperson called.

"They can't hide forever!" the shopkeeper cried.

The Baudelaires took a deep breath, and then bolted toward the exit of the Last Chance General Store, but as soon as they got outside they realized the shopkeeper was right. The sun was rising, revealing the flat and desolate landscape the children had walked across all night. In a few hours the entire countryside would be covered in sunlight, and the land was so flat that the children would be seen from far, far away. They couldn't hide forever, and as Violet, Klaus, and Sunny stood outside the Last Chance General Store, it seemed that they couldn't hide for even one more instant.

"Look!" Klaus said, and pointed in the direction of the rising sun. Parked a ways from the store was a square, gray van with the letters V.F.D. printed on its side.

"That must be the Volunteers Fighting Disease," Violet said. "The deliveryperson said only he and the volunteers were allowed in the area."

"Then they're the only way we can hide," Klaus said. "If we can sneak aboard that van, we can escape from the police, at least for now."

"But this might be the right V.F.D.," Violet said. "If these volunteers are part of the sinister secret the Quagmire triplets tried to tell us about, we might be going from a bad situation to a worse one."

"Or," Klaus said, "it might get us closer to solving the mystery of Jacques Snicket. Remember, he said he worked as a volunteer, right before he was murdered."

"It won't do us any good to solve the mystery of Jacques Snicket," Violet said, "if we're in jail."

"Blusin," Sunny said. She meant something along the lines of, "We don't have much choice," and in small, tottering steps she led her siblings toward the V.F.D. van.

"But how will we get on the van?" Violet asked, walking alongside her sister.

"What will we say to the volunteers?" Klaus asked, hurrying to catch up.

"Impro," Sunny said, which meant "We'll think of something," but for once the three children didn't have to think of something. As the youngsters reached the van, a friendly-looking man with a guitar in his hands and a beard on his face leaned out of one of the windows and called to them.

“We almost left you behind, brother and sisters!” he said. “We filled the van up with free gas, and now we’re all set to head off to the hospital.” With a smile, the man unlatched the door of the van and opened it, beckoning to the three children. “Climb aboard,” he said. “We don’t want our volunteers to get lost before we even sing the first verse. I heard something about murderers lurking around this area.”

“Did you read it in the newspaper?” Klaus asked nervously.

The bearded man laughed, and strummed a cheerful chord on his guitar. “Oh, no,” he said. “We don’t read the newspaper. It’s too depressing. Our motto is ‘No news is good news.’ You must be new volunteers, not to know that. Well, hop in.”

The Baudelaires hesitated. As I’m sure you know, it is rarely a good idea to get into an automobile with somebody you haven’t met before, particularly if the person believes in such nonsense as “No news is good news.” But it is *never* a good idea to stand around a flat and empty landscape while the police are closing in to arrest you for a crime you have not committed, and the three children paused for a moment to decide between doing something which is rarely a good idea, and something that is never a good idea. They looked at the bearded man with the guitar. They looked at each other. And then they looked back at the Last Chance General Store, where they saw the shopkeeper, rushing out of the front door and toward the van.

“O.K.,” Violet said finally. “We’ll hop in.”

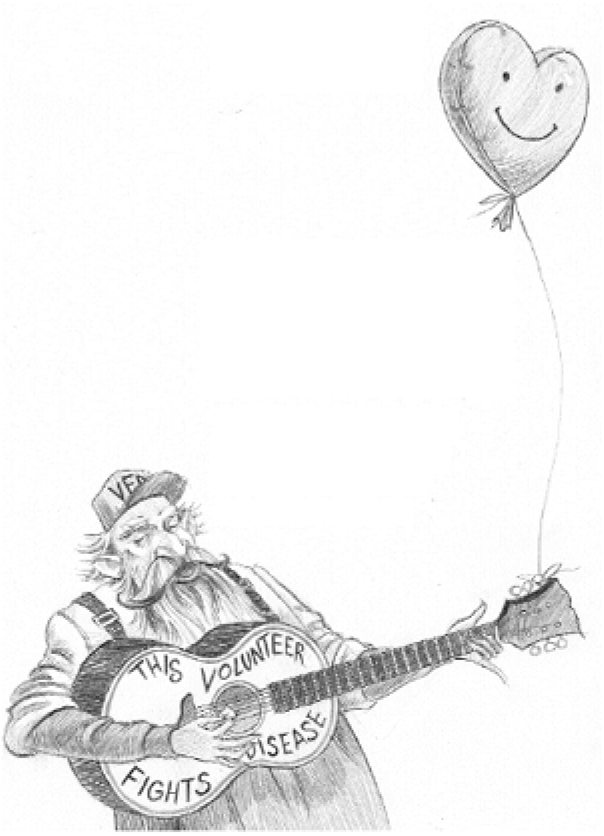
The bearded man smiled, and the children stepped into the V.F.D. van and shut the door behind them. They did not hop, even though the man had asked them to “hop in,” because hopping is something done in the cheerful moments of one’s life. A plumber might hop, for instance, if she finally fixed a particularly difficult leak in someone’s shower. A sculptor would hop if his sculpture of four basset hounds playing cards was finally finished. And I would hop like nobody has ever hopped before, if I could somehow go back to that terrible Thursday, and stop Beatrice from attending that afternoon tea where she met Esmé Squalor for the first time.

But Violet, Klaus, and Sunny did not hop, because they were not plumbers fixing leaks, or sculptors finishing works of art, or authors magically erasing a series of unfortunate events. They were three desperate children, falsely accused of murder, forced to run out of a store into a stranger’s automobile to avoid capture by the police. The Baudelaires were not hopping, even as the van started its engine and began to drive away from the Last Chance General Store, ignoring the desperate signals of the shopkeeper as he ran to try to stop them. As the V.F.D. van began to drive across the lonely landscape, the Baudelaire orphans were not sure they would ever hop again.

CHAPTER
Three

We are Volunteers Fighting Disease,
And we're cheerful all day long.
If someone said that we were sad,
That person would be wrong.

We visit people who are sick,
And try to make them smile,
Even if their noses bleed,
Or if they cough up bile.



Tra la la, Fiddle dee dee,

Hope you get well soon.

Ho ho ho, hee hee hee,

Have a heart-shaped balloon.

We visit people who are ill,
And try to make them laugh,
Even when the doctor says
He must saw them in half.

We sing and sing all night and day,
And then we sing some more.
We sing to boys with broken bones
And girls whose throats are sore.

Tra la la, Fiddle dee dee,

Hope you get well soon.

Ho ho ho, hee hee hee,

Have a heart-shaped balloon.

We sing to men with measles,
And to women with the flu,
And if you breathe in deadly germs,
We'll probably sing to you.

Tra la la, Fiddle dee dee,

Hope you get well soon.

Ho ho ho, hee hee hee,

Have a heart-shaped balloon.

An associate of mine named William Congreve once wrote a very sad play that begins with the line "Music has charms to soothe a savage breast," a sentence which here means that if you are nervous or upset, you might listen to some music to calm you down or cheer you up. For instance, as I crouch here behind the altar of the Cathedral of the Alleged Virgin, a friend of mine is playing a sonata on the pipe organ, to calm me down and so the sounds of my typewriter will not be heard by the worshipers sitting in the pews. The mournful melody of the sonata reminds me of a tune my father used to sing when he did the dishes, and as I listen to it I can temporarily forget six or seven of my troubles.

But the soothing effect of music on a savage breast obviously depends on what kind of music is being played, and I'm sorry to say that as the Baudelaire orphans listened to the song of V.F.D., they did not feel even one bit less nervous or upset. When Violet, Klaus, and Sunny first boarded the V.F.D. van, they were so worried about avoiding capture that they scarcely took a look around them until they were quite far away from the Last Chance General Store. But when the shopkeeper was merely a speck on the flat and empty landscape, the children turned their attention to their new hiding place. There were about twenty people in the van, and every single one of them was exceedingly cheerful. There were cheerful men, cheerful women, a handful of cheerful children, and a very cheerful driver who occasionally took his eyes off the road to grin cheerfully at all his passengers. When the Baudelaires took a long trip in an automobile, they liked to pass the time reading or looking at the scenery and thinking their own private thoughts, but as soon as the van pulled away from the general store, the bearded man began playing his guitar and led all of the Volunteers Fighting Disease in a cheerful song, and each "tra la la" only made the Baudelaires more anxious than before. When the volunteers began to sing the verse about people's noses bleeding, the siblings were sure someone would stop singing and say, "Wait a minute! These three children weren't on the van before! They don't belong here!" When the singers reached the verse about the doctor sawing someone in half, the children were certain someone would stop singing and say, "Wait a minute! Those three people don't know the lyrics to the song! They don't belong here!" And when the cheerful passengers sung the section of the song discussing deadly germs, the siblings were unequivocally positive that someone would stop singing and say, "Wait a minute! Those three children are the murderers described in *The Daily Punctilio*! They don't belong here!"

But the Volunteers Fighting Disease were too cheerful to wait a minute. They believed so strongly that no news is good news that none of them had even glanced at *The Daily Punctilio.* And they were too busy singing to notice that the Baudelaires didn't belong on the van.

"Boy, do I love that song!" the bearded man said, when the last chorus had ended. "I could sing it all the way to Heimlich Hospital. But I guess we'd better save our voices for the day's work. So why don't we settle down and have cheerful conversations until we arrive?"

"That sounds super-duper!" said one of the volunteers, and everyone nodded in agreement. The bearded man put away his guitar and sat down next to the Baudelaires.

"We'd better make up false names," Violet whispered to Klaus, "so no one will learn who we are."

"But *The Daily Punctilio* got our names wrong," Klaus whispered back, "so maybe we should use our real names."

"Well, let's get to know each other," the bearded man said cheerfully. "I like to get to know each and every one of our volunteers."

"Well, my name is Sally," Violet began, "and—"

"No, no," the bearded man said. "We don't use names in V.F.D. We just call everybody 'sister' and 'brother,' because we believe all people are sisters and brothers."

"I'm confused," Klaus said. "I always thought that brothers and sisters are people who share the same parents."

"Not always, brother," the bearded man said. "Sometimes brothers and sisters are just people who are united for a common cause."

"Does that mean, brother," Violet said, trying this new use of the word "brother" and not liking it much, "that you don't know the names of anyone in this van?"

"That's right, sister," the bearded man said.

"And so you've never known the name of anyone who's been a Volunteer Fighting Disease?" Klaus asked.

"Not a single one," the bearded man said. "Why do you ask?"

"There's a person we know," Violet said carefully, "who we think might have been in V.F.D. He had one eyebrow instead of two, and a tattoo of an eye on his ankle."

The bearded man frowned. "I don't know anyone of that description," he said, "and I've been with the Volunteers Fighting Disease since the organization first started."

“Rats!” Sunny said.

“What my sister means,” Klaus said, “is that we’re disappointed. We were hoping to learn more about this person.”

“Are you sure he was in Volunteers Fighting Disease?” the bearded man asked.

“No,” Klaus admitted. “We just know he worked in the volunteer something.”

“Well, there are lots of volunteer somethings,” the bearded man replied. “What you kids need is some sort of Library of Records.”

“A Library of Records?” Violet said.

“A Library of Records is a place where official information is stored,” the bearded man said. “In a Library of Records, you could find a list of every single volunteer organization in the world. Or you could look up this person and see if there’s a file on him. Perhaps that would tell you where he worked.”

“Or how he knew our parents,” Klaus said, speaking out loud without thinking.

“Your parents?” the bearded man said, looking around the van. “Are they here, too?”

The Baudelaires looked at one another, wishing that their parents were there on the van, even though it would be awkward to call their father “brother” and their mother “sister.” Sometimes it seemed to the children that it had been hundreds and hundreds of years since that terrible day at the beach when Mr. Poe brought them the dreadful news, but just as often it seemed as if it had been only minutes. Violet could picture her father, sitting next to her, perhaps pointing out something interesting he had seen through the window. Klaus could picture his mother, smiling and shaking her head in amusement at the ridiculous lyrics of the V.F.D. song. And Sunny could picture all five Baudelaires, together again, with nobody fleeing from the police, or accused of murder, or trying desperately to solve mysteries, or worst of all, gone forever in a terrible fire. But just because you can picture something does not make it so. The Baudelaire parents were not in the van, and the children looked at the bearded man and shook their heads sadly.

“My, you look glum,” the bearded man said. “Well, don’t worry. I’m sure wherever your parents are, they’re having a good time, so let’s not see any frowny faces. Being cheerful is the whole point of Volunteers Fighting Disease.”

“What exactly will we be doing at the hospital?” Violet asked, eager to change the subject.

“Just what V.F.D. says,” the bearded man replied. “We’re volunteers, and we’ll be fighting diseases.”

“I hope we won’t be giving shots,” Klaus said. “Needles make me a bit nervous.”

“Of course we won’t be giving shots,” the bearded man said. “We only do cheerful things. Mostly we wander the halls singing to sick people, and giving them heart-shaped balloons, like the song says.”

“But how does that fight disease?” Violet said.

“Because getting a cheerful balloon helps people picture getting better, and if you picture something, it makes it so,” the bearded man explained. “After all, a cheerful attitude is the most effective tool against sickness.”

“I thought antibiotics were,” Klaus said.

“Echinacea!” Sunny said. She meant “Or well-tested herbal remedies,” but the bearded man had stopped paying attention to the children and was looking out the window.

“We’ve arrived, volunteers!” he called out. “We’re at Heimlich Hospital!” He turned to the Baudelaires and pointed out at the horizon. “Isn’t it a beautiful building?”

The children looked out the windows of the van and found that they could only half agree with the bearded man, for the simple reason that Heimlich Hospital was only half a building, or at best two thirds. The left side of the hospital was a shiny white structure, with a row of tall pillars and small carved portraits of famous doctors over each window. In front of the building was a neatly mowed lawn, with occasional patches of brightly colored wildflowers. But the right side of the hospital was scarcely a structure at all, let alone a beautiful one. There were a few boards nailed together into rectangles, and a few planks nailed down for floors, but there were no walls or windows, so it looked like a drawing of a hospital rather than a hospital itself. There was no sign of any pillars and not even one carved doctor portrait on this half-finished side, just a few sheets of plastic fluttering in the wind, and instead of a lawn there was just an empty field of dirt. It was as if the architect in charge of constructing the building had decided halfway through that he'd rather go on a picnic, and had never returned. The driver parked the van underneath a sign that was half finished, too: the word "Heimlich" was in fancy gold letters on a clean white square of wood, but the word "Hospital" was scrawled in ballpoint pen on a piece of cardboard ripped from an old box.

"I'm sure they'll finish it someday," the bearded man continued. "But in the meantime, we can picture the other half, and picturing something makes it so. Now, let's picture ourselves getting out of the van."

The three Baudelaires did not have to picture it, but they followed the bearded man and the rest of the volunteers out of the van and onto the lawn in front of the prettier half of the hospital. The members of V.F.D. were stretching their arms and legs after the long drive, and helping the bearded man remove a big bunch of heart-shaped balloons from the back of the van, but the children merely stood around anxiously and tried to figure out what to do next.

"Where should we go?" Violet asked. "If we walk around the hallways of the hospital singing to people, someone will recognize us."

"That's true," Klaus said. "The doctors, nurses, administrators, and patients can't all believe that no news is good news. I'm sure some of them have read this morning's *Daily Punctilio*."

“Aronec,” Sunny said, which meant “And we’re not getting any closer to learning anything about V.F.D., or Jacques Snicket.”

“That’s true,” Violet agreed. “Maybe we need to find a Library of Records, like the bearded man said.”

“But where can we find one?” Klaus asked. “We’re in the middle of nowhere.”

“No walk!” Sunny said.

“I don’t want to start all that walking again either,” Violet said, “but I don’t see what else we can do.”

“O.K., volunteers!” the bearded man said. He took his guitar out of the van and began playing some cheerful and familiar chords. “Everyone take a heart-shaped balloon and start singing!

“We are Volunteers Fighting Disease,
And we’re cheerful all day long,
If someone said that we were sad,
That person would be—”

“Attention!” interrupted a voice that seemed to come from the sky. The voice was female but very scratchy and faint, as if the voice were that of a woman talking with a piece of aluminum foil over her mouth. “Your attention please!”

“Shh, everybody!” the bearded man said, stopping the song. “That’s Babs, the Head of Human Resources at the hospital. She must have an important announcement.”

“Attention!” the voice said. “This is Babs, Head of Human Resources. I have an important announcement.”

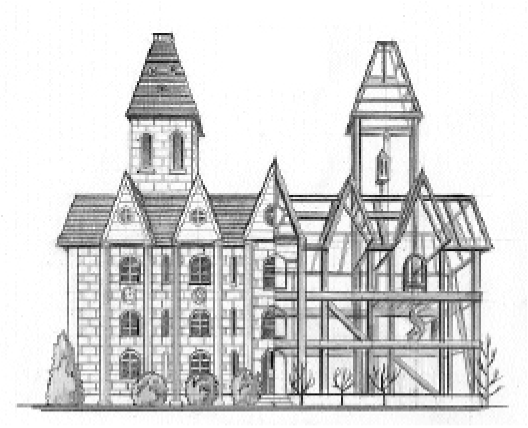
“Where is she?” Klaus asked him, worried that she might recognize the three accused murderers hiding in V.F.D.

“In the hospital someplace,” the bearded man replied. “She prefers communicating over the intercom.”

The word “intercom” here refers to someone talking into a microphone someplace and having their voice come out of speakers someplace else, and sure enough the children noticed a small row of square speakers placed on the finished half of the building, just above the doctor portraits. “Attention!” the voice said again, and it became even scratchier and fainter, as if the woman with the piece of aluminum foil over her mouth had fallen into a swimming pool filled with fizzy soda. This is not a pleasant way to hear someone talk, and yet as soon as Babs made her announcement, the savage breasts of the Baudelaire orphans were instantly soothed, as if the scratchy and faint voice were a calming piece of music. But the Baudelaires did not feel better because of the way Babs’s voice sounded. The announcement soothed the children’s savage breasts because of what it said.

“I need three members of the Volunteers Fighting Disease who are willing to be given a new assignment,” said the voice. “Those three volunteers should report immediately to my office, which is the seventeenth door on the left as you enter the finished half of the building. Instead of walking around the hallways of the hospital singing to people, these three volunteers will be working in the Library of Records here at Heimlich Hospital.”

CHAPTER
Four



Whether you have been sent to see the principal of your school for throwing wet paper towels at the ceiling to see if they stick, or taken to the dentist to plead with him to hollow out one of your teeth so you can smuggle a single page of your latest book past the guards at the airport, it is never a pleasant feeling to stand outside the door of an office, and as the Baudelaire orphans stood at the door reading “Office of the Head of Human Resources” they were reminded of all the unpleasant offices they had recently visited. On their very first day at Prufrock Preparatory School, before they had even met Isadora and Duncan Quagmire, the Baudelaires had visited the office of Vice Principal Nero and learned about all of the academy’s strict and unfair rules. When they worked at Lucky Smells Lumbermill, the siblings had been summoned to the office of the owner, who made clear just how dreadful their situation really was. And, of course, Violet, Klaus, and Sunny had been many, many times to Mr. Poe’s office at the bank, where he coughed and talked on the phone and made decisions about the Baudelaires’ future that had not proved to be good ones. But even if the children had not had all these unfortunate experiences in offices, it was perfectly understandable that the Baudelaire children had to stand for a few moments in front of the seventeenth door on the left, and gather their courage to knock.

"I'm not sure we should take this risk," Violet said. "If Babs has read this morning's edition of *The Daily Punctilio*, she'll recognize us as soon as we walk through the door. We might as well be knocking on the door of our jail cell."

"But the Library of Records might be our only hope," Klaus said. "We need to find out who Jacques Snicket really was—where he worked, and how he knew us. If we get some evidence, we can convince people that Count Olaf is still alive and that we're not murderers."

"Curoy," Sunny added, which meant "Besides, the Quagmire triplets are far, far away, and we have only a few pages of their notebooks. We need to find the real meaning of V.F.D."

"Sunny's right," Klaus said. "In the Library of Records, we might even solve the mystery of that underground passageway that led from Jerome and Esmé Squalor's apartment to the ashy remains of the Baudelaire mansion."

"Afficu," Sunny said. She meant something like "And the only way we'll get into the Library of Records is if we talk to Babs, so it's a risk we have to take."

"All right," Violet said, looking down at her sister and smiling. "You've convinced me. But if Babs begins looking at us suspiciously, we'll leave, agreed?"

"Agreed," Klaus said.

"Yep," Sunny said, and knocked on the door.

"Who is it?" Babs's voice called out.

"It's three members of Volunteers Fighting Disease," Violet replied. "We're here to volunteer at the Library of Records."

“Come in,” Babs commanded, and the children opened the door and walked into the office. “I was wondering when someone would show up,” the Head of Human Resources continued. “I was just finishing up reading this morning’s paper. These three terrible children are running around killing people.”

The Baudelaires looked at one another and were about to run back out the door when they saw something in the office that changed their minds. The office of the Head of Human Resources at Heimlich Hospital was a small one, with a small desk, two small chairs, and a small window decorated with two small curtains. On the windowsill was a small vase of yellow flowers and on the wall was a small tasteful portrait of a man leading a horse to a small pond of fresh water. But it was not the furnishings, the flower arrangement, or the tasteful artwork that made the three orphans stop.

Babs’s voice had come from the direction of the desk, which the Baudelaires had expected, but what they hadn’t expected was that Babs was not sitting behind the desk, or on the desk or even beneath it. Instead, a small square intercom speaker—just like the ones on the outside of the hospital—had been placed in the middle of the desk, and it was from this speaker that the speaking had been spoken. It was strange to hear speaking from a speaker instead of from the person who was speaking, but the children realized they could not be recognized if Babs could not see them, so they did not run out of the room.

“We’re three children, too,” Violet said to the speaker, trying to be as honest as she could, “but we’d much rather volunteer in the hospital than embark on a life of crime.”

“If you’re children, then be silent!” Babs’s voice said rudely. “In my opinion, children should be seen and not heard. I’m an adult, so it follows that I should be heard and not seen. That’s why I work exclusively over the intercom. You will be working exclusively with the most important thing we do in this hospital. Can you guess what it is?”

“Healing sick people?” Klaus guessed.

"Be silent!" the speaker commanded. "Children should be seen and not heard, remember? Just because I can't see you doesn't mean you should start babbling about sick people. You're wrong, anyway. The most important thing we do at the hospital is paperwork, and you will be working at the Library of Records, filing paperwork. I'm sure this will be difficult for you, because children never have any administrative experience."

"Hend," said Sunny in disagreement. Violet was about to explain that her sister meant something along the lines of "Actually, I worked as an administrative assistant at Prufrock Preparatory School," but the intercom speaker was too busy reproving the Baudelaires, a phrase which here means "shouting 'Be silent!'" at every opportunity.

"Be silent!" the speaker shouted. "Instead of chattering away, report to the Library of Records at once. The Library of Records is located in the basement, at the very bottom of the staircase next to this office. You'll go straight there every morning when the van arrives at Heimlich Hospital, and you'll return straight to the van at the end of each day. The van will take you back home. Are there any questions?"

The Baudelaires had plenty of questions, of course, but they did not ask them. They knew that if they said even one word, the intercom speaker would command them to be silent, and besides, they were eager to get to the Library of Records, where they hoped to answer the most important questions of their lives.

"Excellent!" the speaker said. "You're learning to be seen instead of heard. Now, get out of this office."

The children got out of that office and quickly found the staircase the speaker had mentioned. The Baudelaires were glad that the route to the Library of Records was so easy to remember, because Heimlich Hospital seemed like a place where it would be very easy to get lost. The staircase curved this way and that, leading to many doors and corridors, and every ten feet or so, nailed to the wall just below an intercom speaker there was a complicated map of the hospital, filled with arrows, stars, and other symbols the Baudelaires did not recognize. Every so often, the children would see someone from the hospital walking toward them. Although neither the Volunteers Fighting Disease nor the Head of Human Resources had recognized the three children, it was certain that someone in the hospital must have read *The Daily Punctilio*, and the Baudelaires did not want to be seen or heard, and they would have to turn and face the wall, pretending to consult the map so anyone walking by would not see their faces.

“That was close,” Violet sighed in relief, when a group of chatting doctors had gone by without even glancing at the youngsters.

“It was close,” Klaus agreed, “and we don’t want it to get any closer. I don’t think we should get back on the van at the end of the day—or any other day. Sooner or later we’re bound to be recognized.”

“You’re right,” Violet said. “We’d have to walk back through the hospital every day, just to get to the van. But where will we go at night? People will think it is odd if three children are sleeping in the Library of Records.”

“Half,” Sunny suggested.

“That’s a pretty good idea,” Violet replied. “We could sleep in the unfinished half of the hospital. Nobody will go there at night.”

“Sleep all by ourselves, in a half-finished room?” Klaus asked. “It’ll be cold and dark.”

“It can’t be much worse than the Orphans Shack at Prufrock Prep,” Violet said.

“Danya,” Sunny said, which meant “Or the bedroom at Count Olaf’s house.”

Klaus shuddered, remembering how terrible it was when Count Olaf had been their guardian. “You’re right,” he said, stopping at a door which read “Library of Records.” “The unfinished wing of the hospital can’t be that bad.”

The Baudelaires knocked on the door, which opened almost immediately to reveal one of the oldest men they had ever met, wearing one of the tiniest pairs of glasses they had ever seen. Each lens was scarcely bigger than a green pea, and the man had to squint in order to look at them.

“My eyesight isn’t what it used to be,” he said, “but you appear to be children. And you’re very familiar children, too. I’m certain I’ve seen your faces somewhere before.”

The Baudelaires looked at one another in panic, not knowing whether to dash out of the room or to try to convince the man he was mistaken.

“We’re new volunteers,” Violet said. “I don’t think we’ve ever met before.”

“Babs assigned us to work in the Library of Records,” Klaus said.

“Well, you’ve come to the right place,” the old man said with a wrinkled smile. “My name is Hal, and I’ve worked here in the Library of Records for more years than I’d like to count. I’m afraid my eyesight isn’t what it used to be, so I asked Babs if some volunteers could help me.”

“Wolick,” Sunny said.

“My sister says we’re very happy to be of assistance,” Violet said, “and we are.”

“Well, I’m glad to hear that,” Hal said. “Because there’s a lot of work to be done. Come on in and I’ll explain what you have to do.”

The Baudelaires walked through the door and found themselves in a small room with nothing much in it but a small table that held a bowl of fresh fruit. “This is the library?” Klaus said.

“Oh no,” the man said. “This is just an antechamber, a small room I’m using to store my fruit. If you get hungry during the day, you may help yourself to something out of that bowl. Also, this is where the intercom is, so we’ll have to report here whenever Babs makes an announcement.” He led them across the room to a small door and took a loop of string out of the pocket of his coat. On the loop of string were hundreds of keys, which made tiny clanging noises as they jostled one another. Hal quickly found the right key to unlock the door. “This,” he said with a small smile, “is the Library of Records.”

Hal ushered the children inside a dim room with very low ceilings—so low that Hal’s gray hair almost brushed against the top. But although the room was not very tall, it was enormous. The Library of Records stretched out so far in front of the Baudelaires that they could scarcely see the opposite wall, or, as the children looked from side to side, the right and left walls. All they could see were big metal file cabinets, with neatly labeled drawers describing the files contained inside. The file cabinets were placed in row after row, as far as the eye could see. The rows were placed very close together, so that the siblings had to walk behind Hal in single file as he gave them the tour of the room.

“I’ve organized everything myself,” he explained. “The Library of Records contains information not only from Heimlich Hospital, but from all over the area. There’s information about everything from poetry to pills, from picture frames to pyramids, and from pudding to psychology—and that’s just in the P aisle, which we’re walking down right now.”

“What an amazing place,” Klaus said. “Just think of everything we can learn from reading all these files.”

“No, no, no,” Hal said, shaking his head sternly. “We’re supposed to file this information, not read it. I don’t want to see you touching any of these files except when you’re working with them. That’s why I keep all these file cabinets locked up tight. Now, let me show you exactly where you’ll be working.”

Hal led them to the far wall and pointed out a small rectangular hole, just wide enough for Sunny or maybe Klaus to crawl through. Beside the hole was a basket with a large stack of paper in it, and a bowl filled with paper clips. “Authorities deposit information into the information chute, which begins outside the hospital and ends right here,” he explained, “and I need two people to help me file these deposits in the right place. Here’s what you do. First, you remove the paper clips and put them in this bowl. Then you glance at the information and figure out where it goes. Remember, try to read as little as possible." He paused, unclipped a small stack of paper, and squinted at the top page. "For instance," he continued. "You only have to read a few words to see that these paragraphs are about the weather last week at Damocles Dock, which is on the shore of some lake someplace. So you would ask me to unlock cabinets in aisle D, for Damocles, or W, for weather, or even P, for paragraphs. It's your choice."

"But won't it be difficult for people to find that information again?" Klaus asked. "They won't know whether to look under D, W, or P."

"Then they'll have to look under all three letters," Hal said. "Sometimes the information you need is not in the most obvious place. Remember, paperwork is the most important thing we do at this hospital, so your job is very important. Do you think you can file these papers correctly? I'd like you to start right away."

"I think we can," Violet said. "But what will the third volunteer do?"

Hal looked embarrassed and held up the loop of string with all the keys on it. "I lost some of the keys to the file cabinets," he admitted, "and I need someone to use some sort of sharp object to open them up."

"Me!" Sunny said.

"My sister means that she'd be perfect for that job, because she has very sharp teeth," Violet explained.

"Your sister?" Hal said, and scratched his head. "Somehow, I knew you three children were from the same family. I'm certain I was just reading some information about you."

The children looked at one another again, and felt a nervous flutter in their stomachs. "Do you read *The Daily Punctilio*?" Klaus asked carefully.

"Of course not," Hal said with a frown. "That newspaper is the worst I've ever seen. Nearly every story they print is an absolute lie."

The Baudelaires smiled in relief. “We can’t tell you how happy we are to hear that,” Violet said. “Well, I guess we’d better get to work.”

“Yes, yes,” Hal said. “Come on, little one, I’ll show you where the locked cabinets are, and you two start filing. I just wish I could remember….” The old man’s voice trailed off, andthen he snapped his fingers and grinned.

There are many reasons, of course, why someone might snap their fingers and grin. If you heard some pleasing music, for instance, you might snap your fingers and grin to demonstrate that the music had charms that could soothe your savage breast. If you were employed as a spy, you might snap your fingers and grin in order to deliver a message in secret snapping-and-grinning code. But you might also snap your fingers and grin if you had been trying hard to remember something, and had suddenly succeeded. Hal was not listening to music in the Library of Records, and after nine months, six days, and fourteen hours of research, I can say with reasonable certainty that Hal was not employed as a spy, so it would be sensible to conclude he had just remembered something.

“I just remembered something,” he said. “I know why you three seem so familiar.” Hal continued to lead Sunny down another aisle of file cabinets to show her where her teeth could be handy, so his voice floated over to the two older Baudelaires as if he were speaking on an intercom. “I didn’t read it, of course, but there was some information about you in the file about the Snicket fires.”

CHAPTER
Five

“*I* just don’t understand it,” said Klaus, which was not something he said very often.

Violet nodded in agreement, and then said something she didn’t say very frequently either. “It’s a puzzle I’m not sure we can solve.”

“Pietrisycamollaviadelrechiotemexity,” Sunny said, which was something she had said only once before. It meant something along the lines of “I must admit I don’t have the faintest idea of what is going on,” and the first time the youngest Baudelaire had said it, she had just been brought home from the hospital where she was born, and was looking at her siblings as they leaned over her crib to greet her. This time, she was sitting in the unfinished wing of the hospital where she worked, and was looking at her siblings as they tried to guess what Hal had meant when he had mentioned “the Snicket fires.” If I had been with the children, I would have been able to tell them a long and terrible story about men and women who joined a noble organization only to find their lives wrecked by a greedy man and a lazy newspaper, but the siblings were alone, and all they had of the story were a few pages from the Quagmire notebooks.

It was night, and after working all day in the Library of Records, the Baudelaire orphans had made themselves as comfortable as they could in the half-finished section of Heimlich Hospital, but I'm sorry to say the phrase "as comfortable as they could" here means "not very comfortable at all." Violet had found a few flashlights designed to be used by builders working in dark corners, but when she arranged them to light up their surroundings, the light only made clear just how filthy their surroundings really were. Klaus had found some dropcloths, designed to be used by painters who did not want to drip paint on the floor, but when he wrapped them around himself and his sisters, the warmth only made clear just how freezing it was when the evening wind blew through the sheets of plastic that were nailed to the wooden boards. And Sunny had used her teeth to chop up some of the fruit in Hal's bowl, to make a sort of fruit salad for dinner, but each handful of chopped fruit only made clear just how inappropriate it was to be living in such a bare and lonely place. But even though it was clear to the children how filthy, freezing, and inappropriate their new living quarters were, nothing else seemed clear at all.

"We wanted to use the Library of Records to learn more about Jacques Snicket," Violet said, "but we might end up learning more about ourselves. What in the world do you think is written about us in that file Hal mentioned?"

"I don't know," Klaus replied, "and I don't think Hal knows, either. He said he doesn't read any of the files."

"Seerg," Sunny said, which meant "And I was afraid to ask him any more about it."

"Me, too," Violet said. "We simply can't call attention to ourselves. Any minute now, Hal could learn that we're wanted for murder, and we'd be dragged off to jail before we learned anything more."

“We’ve already escaped from one jail cell,” Klaus said. “I don’t know if we could do it again.”

“I thought that if we had a chance to look over these pages from Duncan’s and Isadora’s notebooks,” Violet said, “we would find the answers to our questions, but the Quagmires’ notes are very difficult to read.”

Klaus frowned, and moved a few fragments of the Quagmire pages around as if they were pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. “The harpoon gun tore these pages to shreds,” he said. “Look what Duncan has written here: ‘Jacques Snicket worked for V.F.D., which stands for Volunteer—’ and then it’s ripped, right in the middle of the sentence.”

“And on this page,” Violet said, picking up a page I cannot bear to think about, “it reads,

“*In photographs, and in each public place,*
Snicket rarely shows his face.

“Isadora must have written that one—it’s a rhyming couplet.”

“This scrap says ‘apartment,’” Klaus said, “and has what looks like half of a map. That might have to do with the apartment where we lived with Jerome and Esmé Squalor.”

“Don’t remind me,” Violet said, shuddering at the thought of all the misfortune the children had encountered at 667 Dark Avenue.

“Rabave,” Sunny said, pointing to one of the pieces of paper.

“This page has two names on it,” Violet said. “One name is Al Funcoot.”

“That’s the man who wrote that horrible play Olaf forced us to perform,” Klaus said.

“I know,” Violet said, “but the other name I don’t recognize: ‘Ana Gram.’”

“Well, the Quagmires were researching Count Olaf and his sinister plot,” Klaus said. “Maybe Ana Gram is one of Olaf’s associates.”

“It’s probably not the hook-handed man,” Violet said, “or the bald man with the long nose. Ana is not usually a man’s name.”

“It could be the name of one of the whitefaced women,” Klaus said.

“Orlando!” Sunny said, which meant “Or the one who looks like neither a man nor a woman.”

“Or someone we haven’t even met yet,” Violet said with a sigh, and turned her attention to another piece of paper. “This page isn’t ripped at all, but all it has on it is a long list of dates. It looks like something was going on every twelve weeks or so.”

Klaus picked up the smallest piece and held it up for his sisters to see. Behind his glasses his eyes looked very sad. “This piece just says ‘fire,’” he said quietly, and the three Baudelaires looked down sadly at the dusty floor. With any word, there are subconscious associations, which simply means that certain words make you think of certain things, even if you don’t want to. The word “cake,” for example, might remind you of your birthday, and the words “prison warden” might remind you of someone you haven’t seen in a very long time. The word “Beatrice” reminds me of a volunteer organization that was swarming with corruption, and the word “midnight” reminds me that I must keep writing this chapter very quickly, or else I will probably drown. But the Baudelaires had all sorts of subconscious associations with the word “fire,” and none of them were pleasant to think about. The word made the children think of Hal, who had mentioned something about the Snicket fires that afternoon in the Library of Records. “Fire” made the youngsters think of Duncan and Isadora Quagmire, who had lost their parents and their brother, Quigley, in a fire. And, of course, the word “fire” made the Baudelaires think of the fire that had destroyed their home and had begun the unfortunate journey that had led them to the half-finished wing of Heimlich Hospital. The three children huddled quietly together under their dropcloths, getting colder and colder as they thought about all the fires and subconscious associations that were in the Baudelaire lives.

“That file must contain the answers to all these mysteries,” Violet said finally. “We need to find out who Jacques Snicket was, and why he had the same tattoo as Count Olaf.”

“And we need to know why he was murdered,” Klaus added, “and we need to learn the secret of V.F.D.”

“Us,” Sunny said, which meant “And we need to know why there’s a picture of us in the file.”

“We have to get our hands on that file,” Violet said.

“That’s easier said than done,” Klaus pointed out. “Hal told us specifically not to touch any of the files we weren’t working with, and he’ll be right there with us in the Library of Records.”

“We’ll just have to find a way,” Violet replied. “Now, let’s try and get a good night’s sleep, so we can stay alert tomorrow, and get ahold of the file on the Snicket fires.”

Klaus and Sunny nodded in agreement, and arranged the dropcloths into a sort of bed, while Violet turned off the flashlights one by one. The three Baudelaires huddled together for the rest of the night, getting what sleep they could on a filthy floor with a cold wind blowing through their inappropriate home, and in the morning, after a breakfast of leftover fruit salad, they walked to the completed half of Heimlich Hospital and carefully walked down all those stairs, past the intercom speakers and the confusing maps. Hal was already in the Library of Records when they arrived, unlocking the file cabinets with his long loop of keys, and immediately Violet and Klaus got to work filing the information that had come through the chute during the night, while Sunny turned her tooths’ attention to the file cabinets that needed to be opened. But the Baudelaires’ minds were not on filing, or on file cabinets. Their minds were on the file.

Just about everything in this world is easier said than done, with the exception of “systematically assisting Sisyphus’s stealthy, cystsusceptible sister,” which is easier done than said. But it is frustrating to be reminded of this fact. As Violet filed a piece of paper containing information on cuttlefish under M, for mollusks, she said to herself, “I’ll just walk down the S aisle and look under Snicket,” but Hal was already in the S aisle, filing away paintings of sewing machines, and she could not do what she said. As Klaus filed a survey of thimbles under P, for protection of the thumb, he said to himself, “I’ll just walk down the F aisle and look under F, for ‘fires,’” but by that time Hal had moved to the F aisle, and was opening a file cabinet to rearrange biographies of famous Finnish fishermen. And Sunny twisted her teeth this way and that, trying to open one of the locked file cabinets in the B aisle, thinking that perhaps the file was inside, filed under Baudelaires, but when the lock finally broke just after lunch, the youngest sibling opened the cabinet and saw that it was absolutely empty.

“Nil,” Sunny said, as the three children took a short fruit break in the antechamber.

“Me neither,” Klaus said. “But how can we get ahold of the file, when Hal is always around?”

“Maybe we can just ask him to find it for us,” Violet said. “If this were a regular library, we would ask the librarian for help. In a Library of Records, maybe we should ask Hal.”

“You can ask me anything you want,” Hal said, walking into the antechamber “but first I have to ask you something.” He walked over to the children and pointed at one of the fruits. “Is that a plum or a persimmon?” he asked. “My eyesight isn’t what it used to be, I’m afraid.”

“It’s a plum,” Violet said, handing it to him.

“Oh good,” Hal replied, looking it over for bruises. “I was not in the mood for a persimmon. Now, what is your question?”

“We had a question about a certain file,” Klaus began carefully, not wanting Hal to become suspicious. “I know it’s not customary for us to read the files, but if we were very curious, would it be O.K. to make an exception?"

Hal bit into the plum and frowned. "Why would you want to read one of the files?" he asked. "Children should read happy books with bright pictures, not official information from the Library of Records."

"But we're interested in official information," Violet said, "and we're so busy filing things away that we don't get a chance to read anything in the files. That's why we were hoping to take one home with us and read it."

Hal shook his head. "Paperwork is the most important thing we do in this hospital," he said sternly. "That's why the files are only allowed out of the room if there's a very important reason. For example—"

But the Baudelaires did not get to hear an example, because Hal was interrupted by a voice coming over the intercom. "Attention!" the voice said, and the children turned to face a small square speaker. "Attention! Attention!"

The three siblings looked at one another in shock and horror, and then at the wall where the speaker was hanging. The voice coming over the intercom was not Babs's. It was a faint voice, and it was a scratchy voice, but it was not the voice of the Head of Human Resources at Heimlich Hospital. It was a voice that the Baudelaires heard wherever they went, no matter where they lived or who tried to protect them, and even though the children had heard this voice so many times before, they had never gotten used to its sneering tone, as if the person talking were telling a joke with a horrible and violent punch line. "Attention!" the voice said again, but the orphans did not have to be told to pay attention to the terrible voice of Count Olaf.

"Babs has resigned from Heimlich Hospital," said the voice, and the siblings felt as if they could see the cruel smile Olaf always had on his face when he was telling lies. "She decided to pursue a career as a stuntwoman, and has begun throwing herself off buildings immediately. My name is Mattathias, and I am the new Head of Human Resources. I will be conducting a complete inspection of every single employee here at Heimlich Hospital, beginning immediately. That is all."

"An inspection," Hal repeated, finishing his plum. "What nonsense. They should finish the other half of this hospital, instead of wasting time inspecting everything."

"What happens during an inspection?" Violet asked.

"Oh, they just come and look you over," Hal said carelessly, and began walking back to the Library of Records. "We'd better get back to work. There is a lot more information to file."

"We'll be along in a moment," Klaus promised. "I'm not quite done with my fruit."

"Well, hurry up," Hal said, and left the anteroom. The Baudelaires looked at one another in worry and dismay.

"He's found us again," Violet said, talking quietly so Hal could not hear them. She could barely hear her own voice over the sound of her heart pounding with fear.

"He must know we're here," Klaus agreed. "That's why he's doing the inspection—so he can find us and snatch us away."

"Tell!" Sunny said.

"Who can we tell?" Klaus asked. "Everyone thinks Count Olaf is dead. They won't believe three children if we say that he's disguised himself as Mattathias, the new Head of Human Resources."

"Particularly three children who are on the front page of *The Daily Punctilio,*" Violet added, "wanted for murder. Our only chance is to get that file on the Snicket fires, and see if it has any evidence that will bring Olaf to justice."

"But files aren't allowed out of the Library of Records," Klaus said.

“Then we’ll have to read them right here,” Violet said.

“That’s easier said than done,” Klaus pointed out. “We don’t even know what letter to look under, and Hal will be right in the room with us all day long.”

“Night!” Sunny said.

“You’re right, Sunny,” Violet said. “Hal is here all day long, but he goes home at night. When it gets dark, we’ll sneak back over here from the half-finished wing. It’s the only way we’ll be able to find the file.”

“You’re forgetting something,” Klaus said. “The Library of Records will be locked up tight. Hal locks all of the file cabinets, remember?”

“I hadn’t thought of that,” Violet admitted. “I can invent one lockpick, but I’m not sure I’ll have time to invent enough lockpicks to work on all those file cabinets.”

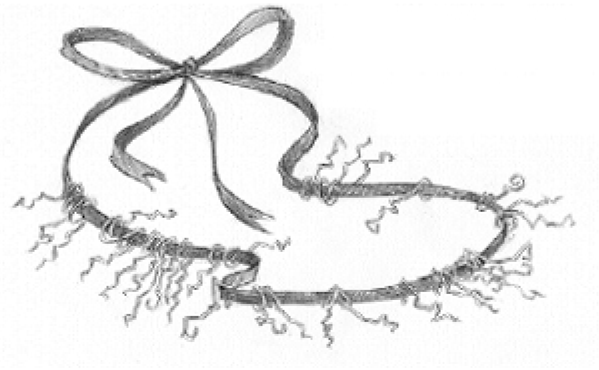
“Deashew!” Sunny said, which meant something like “And it takes me several hours to open one cabinet with my teeth!”

“Without the keys, we’ll never get the file,” Klaus said, “and without the file, we’ll never defeat Count Olaf. What can we do?”

The children sighed, and thought as hard as they could, staring in front of them as they did so, and as soon as they stared in front of them they saw something that gave them an idea. The thing they saw was small, and round, and had colorful and shiny skin, and the youngsters could see that it was a persimmon. But the Baudelaires knew that if someone’s eyesight wasn’t what it used to be, it might look like a plum. The Baudelaire orphans sat and stared at the persimmon, and began to think how they might fool someone into thinking one thing was really another.

CHAPTER
Six

This is not a tale of Lemony Snicket. It is useless to tell the Snicket story, because it happened so very long ago, and because there is nothing anybody can do about the way it has turned out, so the only reason I could possibly have for jotting it down in the margins of these pages would be to make this book even more unpleasant, unnerving, and unbelievable than it already is. This is a story about Violet, Klaus, and Sunny Baudelaire, and how they discovered something in the Library of Records of Heimlich Hospital that changed their lives forever and still gives me the heebie-jeebies whenever I am alone at night STOP. But if this were a book about me, instead of about the three children who would soon run into someone they had hoped never to see again, I might pause for a moment and tell you about something I did many years ago that still troubles me. It was a necessary thing to do, but it was not a nice thing, and even now, I get a small quiver of shame in my stomach whenever I remember it. I might be doing something I enjoy—walking along the promenade deck of a ship, or looking through a telescope at the aurora borealis, or wandering into a bookstore and placing my books on the highest place in the shelf, so that no one will be tempted to buy and read them—when I will suddenly remember this thing I did, and think to myself, *Was it really necessary? Was it absolutely necessary to steal that sugar bowl from Esmé Squalor?*



The Baudelaire orphans were experiencing similar quivers that afternoon, as they finished up the day's work in the Library of Records. Every time Violet put a file in its proper place, she would feel her hair ribbon in her pocket, and get a quiver in her stomach as she thought about what she and her siblings were up to. Klaus would take a stack of papers from the basket in front of the deposit chute, and instead of placing the paper clips in the small bowl, he would keep them hidden in his hand, feeling a quiver in his stomach as he thought about the trick he and his sisters were going to play. And whenever Hal turned his back, and Klaus passed the paper clips to Sunny, the youngest Baudelaire felt a quiver in her stomach as she thought about the sneaky way they were going to return to the Library of Records that night. By the time Hal was locking up the file cabinets for the day with his long loop of keys, the three Baudelaire children had enough quivers in their stomach to attend a Quivery Stomach Festival, if there had been one in the area that afternoon.

"Is it absolutely necessary to do this?" Violet murmured to Klaus, as the three children followed Hal out of the library into the anteroom. She took her hair ribbon out of her pocket and smoothed it out, making sure it didn't have any tangles. "It's not a nice thing to do."

"I know," Klaus answered, holding his hand out so Sunny could hand back the paper clips. "I have a quiver in my stomach just thinking about it. But it's the only way we can get our hands on that file."

"Olaf," Sunny said grimly. She meant "Before Mattathias gets his hands on us," and as soon as she was finished with her sentence, Mattathias's scratchy voice came over the intercom.

“Attention! Attention!” the voice said, as Hal and the Baudelaires looked up at the square speaker. “This is Mattathias, the new Head of Human Resources. Inspections are over for the day but will continue tomorrow.”

“What nonsense,” Hal muttered, putting the loop of keys down on the table. The Baudelaires looked at one another, and then at the keys, as Mattathias continued his announcement.

“Also,” the speaker said, “if anyone in the hospital has any valuables of any kind, please bring them to the Human Resources office for safekeeping. Thank you.”

“My eyeglasses are somewhat valuable,” Hal said, taking them off, “but I’m not going to bring them to the Human Resources office. I might not ever see them again.”

“That’s probably true,” Violet said, shaking her head at Mattathias’s audacity, a word which here means “attempt to steal valuables from hospital employees, in addition to snatching the Baudelaire fortune.”

“Besides,” Hal said, smiling at the children and reaching for his coat, “nobody’s going to steal anything from me. You three are the only people I see at the hospital, and I trust you absolutely. Now, where did I put my keys?”

“Here they are,” Violet said, and the quiver in her stomach got worse. She held up her hair ribbon, which had been tied into a circle to look like a loop of string. Hanging from the ribbon was a long row of paper clips, which Sunny had fashioned into different shapes with her teeth when Hal wasn’t looking. The result looked something like Hal’s loop of keys, the way a horse looks something like a cow, or a woman in a green dress looks something like a pine tree, but there was no way anyone would look at Violet’s hair ribbon full of chewed-up paper clips and think it was a ring of keys—unless, of course, their eyesight was not what it used to be. The three children waited as Hal squinted at what Violet was holding.

“Those are my keys?” Hal said doubtfully. “I thought I put them down on the table.”

“Oh, no,” Klaus said quickly, standing in front of the table so Hal wouldn’t catch a glimpse of his real keys. “Violet has them.”

“Here,” Violet said, moving them back and forth so they would be even harder to squint at, “why don’t I put them in your coat pocket for you?”

“Thank you,” Hal said, as Violet dropped them into his overcoat pocket. He looked at the Baudelaires, his tiny eyes shining with gratitude. “That’s another way you three have helped me. My eyesight’s not what it used to be, you know, so I’m glad I can rely on such good volunteers. Well, good night, children. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Good night, Hal,” Klaus replied. “We’re just going to have one last piece of fruit here in the anteroom.”

“Don’t spoil your dinner,” Hal said. “It’s supposed to be a very cold evening, so I bet your parents have cooked up a nice hot meal.” Hal smiled and shut the door behind him, leaving the children alone with the real keys to the Library of Records and the quivery feeling still in their stomachs.

“Someday,” Violet said quietly, “we’ll apologize to Hal for playing a trick on him, and explain why we had to break the rules. This wasn’t a nice thing to do, even though it was necessary.”

“And we’ll return to the Last Chance General Store,” Klaus said, “and explain to the shopkeeper why we had to run away.”

“Twisp,” Sunny said firmly, which meant “But not until we get ahold of the file, solve all these mysteries, and prove our innocence.”

“You’re right, Sunny,” Violet said, with a sigh. “Let’s get started. Klaus, see if you can find the right key for the Library door.”

Klaus nodded, and carried Hal’s keys over to the door. Not too long ago, when the Baudelaires had been staying with Aunt Josephine by the shores of Lake Lachrymose, Klaus had been in a situation in which he had to match up a key to a locked door very, very quickly, and since then he had been quite good at it. He looked at the lock of the door, which had a very short and narrow keyhole, and then looked at the loop of string, which had one very short and narrow key, and in no time at all the children were reentering the Library of Records and looking down the dim aisles of file cabinets.

“I’m going to lock the door behind us,” Klaus said, “so that nobody will get suspicious if they happen to walk into the anteroom.”

“Like Mattathias,” said Violet with a shudder. “On the intercom he said that they were stopping the inspections for the day, but I bet he’s really still looking.”

“Vapey,” Sunny said, which meant “Then let’s hurry.”

“Let’s start with the S aisle,” Violet said. “For Snicket.”

“Right,” Klaus said, locking the door with a rattle. The three children found the S aisle and began walking past the file cabinets, reading the labels on them to figure out which one to open. “Sauce to Saxifrage,” Klaus read out loud. “That means that anything that falls alphabetically between the word ‘sauce’ and the word ‘saxifrage’ will be in this cabinet. That would be fine if we wanted the Sawmill file.”

“Or the Sauna file,” Violet said. “Let’s move on.”

The children moved on, their footsteps echoing off the low ceilings of the room. “Scarab to Scavenger,” Klaus said, reading one farther down the aisle. Sunny and Violet shook their heads, and the Baudelaires kept moving.

“Secretary to Sediment,” Violet read. “We’re still not there.”

“Kalm,” Sunny said, which meant “I can’t read very well, but I think this one says ‘Sequel to Serenity.’”

“You’re right, Sunny,” Klaus said, smiling at his sister. “It’s the wrong one.”

“Shed to Sheepshank,” Violet read.

“Shellac to Sherbet,” Klaus read, walking farther down the aisle.

“Shipwreck to Shrimp.”

“Sicily to Sideways.”

“Skylight to Slob.”

“Sludge to Smoke.”

“Snack to Snifter.”

“Snowball to Sober.”

“Sonnet to Spackle.”

“Wait!” Klaus cried. “Back up! Snicket is between Snack and Snifter.”

“You’re right,” Violet said, stepping back to find the right cabinet. “I was so distracted by all the strange file names that I forgot what we were looking for. Here it is, Snack to Snifter. Let’s hope the file we’re looking for is here.”

Klaus looked at the lock on the file cabinet, and found the right key on Hal’s loop on only the third try. “It should be in the bottom drawer,” Klaus said, “close to Snifter. Let’s look.”

The Baudelaires looked. A snifter is a type of glass, usually meant for holding brandy, although it is also the term for a strong wind. Plenty of words are close to “snifter” in the alphabet, and the children found many of them. There was a file on sniffing, which seemed to have many photographs of noses. There was a file on Snell’s Law, which states that a ray of light passing from one uniform medium to another produces an identical ratio between the sine of the angle of incidence and the sine of the angle of refraction, which Klaus already knew. There was a file on the inventor of the sneaker, whom Violet admired very much, and one on snicking, which is something Sunny had done many times with her teeth. But there was not a single scrap of paper marked Snicket. The children sighed in disappointment, and shut the drawer of the file cabinet so Klaus could lock it again.

“Let’s try the J aisle, for Jacques,” Violet suggested.

“Shh,” Sunny said.

“No, Sunny,” Klaus said gently. “I don’t think the H aisle is a good bet. Why would Hal have filed it under H?”

“Shh,” Sunny insisted, pointing at the door, and her siblings knew instantly that they had misunderstood her. Usually when Sunny said “Shh,” she meant something along the lines of “I think the H aisle might be a good place to look for the file,” but this time she meant something more along the lines of “Be quiet! I think I hear someone walking into the anteroom of the Library of Records.” Sure enough, when the Baudelaires listened closely, they could hear the clomping of some odd, teetering footsteps, as if someone were walking on very thin stilts. The footsteps grew closer and closer, and then stopped, and as the three children held their breath, the door to the Library rattled as someone tried to open the door.

“Maybe it’s Hal,” Violet whispered, “trying to unlock the door with a paper clip.”

“Maybe it’s Mattathias,” Klaus whispered, “looking for us.”

“Janitor,” Sunny whispered.

“Well, whoever it is,” Violet said, “we’d better hurry to the J aisle.”

The Baudelaires tiptoed across the lowceilinged room to the J aisle, and walked down it quickly, reading the labels of the file cabinets.

“Jabberwocky to Jackal.”

"Jacket to Jack-o'-Lanterns."

"Nersai."

"That's it!" Klaus whispered. "Jacques will be in Jackline to Jacutinga."

"We hope," Violet said, as the door rattled again. Klaus hurried to find the right key, and the children opened the top drawer to look for Jacques. As Violet knew, jackline is a kind of rope used in sailing, and as Klaus knew, jacutinga is a sort of gold-bearing iron ore found in Brazil, and once again there were plenty of files between these two, but although the children found information on jack-o'-lanterns, Jack Russell terriers, and Jacobean drama, there was no file marked "Jacques."

"Fire!" Klaus whispered, shutting and locking the file cabinet. "Let's head to the F aisle."

"And hurry," Violet said. "It sounds like the person in the anteroom is picking the lock."

It was true. The Baudelaires paused for a moment and heard a muffled scratching from behind the door, as if something long and thin were being stuck in the keyhole to try to unlock the lock. Violet knew, from when she and her siblings lived with Uncle Monty, that a lockpick can often take a long time to work properly, even if it has been made by one of the world's greatest inventors, but the children nonetheless moved to the F aisle as fast as their tiptoes could carry them.

"Fabian to Fact."

"Fainting to Fangs."

"Fatalism to Faulkner."

"Fear to Fermat."

"Ficus to Filth."

"Fin de Siècle to Fissle—here it is!"

Once more, the Baudelaires hurried to find the proper key, and then the proper drawer and then the proper file. “Fin de siècle” is a term for a time in history when a century is drawing to a close, and “fissle” is a fancy word for a rustling noise, like the one that continued to come from behind the locked door as the children looked frantically for Fire. But the papers went right from Finland to Firmament, without a single word on Fire in between.

“What will we do?” Violet asked, as the door began to rattle again. “Where else could the file be?”

“Let’s try to think,” Klaus said. “What did Hal say about the file? We know it has to do with Jacques Snicket, and with fire.”

“Prem!” Sunny said, which meant “But we looked under Snicket, Jacques, and Fire already.”

“There must be something else,” Violet said. “We have to find this file. It has crucial information about Jacques Snicket and V.F.D.”

“And about us,” Klaus said. “Don’t forget that.”

The three children looked at one another.

“Baudelaire!” Sunny whispered.

Without another word, the orphans ran to the B aisle, and hurried past Babbitt to Babylon, Bacteria to Ballet, and Bamboo to Baskerville, stopping at Bat Mitzvah to Bavarian Cream. As the door continued to fissle behind them, Klaus tried nine keys in a row before finally opening the cabinet, and there, between the Jewish coming-of-age ceremony for young women, and the delicious filling of certain doughnuts, the children found a folder marked “Baudelaire.”

“It’s here,” Klaus said, taking it out of the drawer with trembling hands.

“What does it say? What does it say?” Violet asked in excitement.

“Look,” Klaus said. “There’s a note on the front.”

“Read it!” Sunny said in a frantic whisper, as the door began to shake violently on its hinges. Whoever was on the other side of the door was obviously getting frustrated with trying to pick the lock.

Klaus held up the file so he could see what the note said in the dim light of the room. “‘All thirteen pages of the Snicket file,’” he read, “‘have been removed from the Library of Records for the official investigation.’” He looked up at his sisters, and they could see that, behind his glasses, his eyes were filling with tears. “That must be when Hal saw our picture,” he said. “When he removed the file and gave it to the official investigators.” He dropped the file on the floor and then sat down beside it in despair. “There’s nothing here.”

“Yes there is!” Violet said. “Look!”

The Baudelaires looked at the file where Klaus had dropped it on the ground. There, behind the note, was a single sheet of paper. “It’s page thirteen,” Violet said, looking at a number typed in a corner of the paper. “The investigators must have left it behind by mistake.”

“That’s why you should keep paper clips on papers that belong together,” Klaus said, “even when you file them. But what does the page say?”

With a long *crackle!* and a loud *bang*, the door to the Library of Records was knocked off its hinges, and fell to the floor of the enormous room as if it had fainted. But the children paid no attention. Violet, Klaus, and Sunny all sat and looked at page thirteen of the file, too amazed to even listen to the odd, teetering footsteps as the intruder entered the room and began to walk along the aisles of file cabinets.

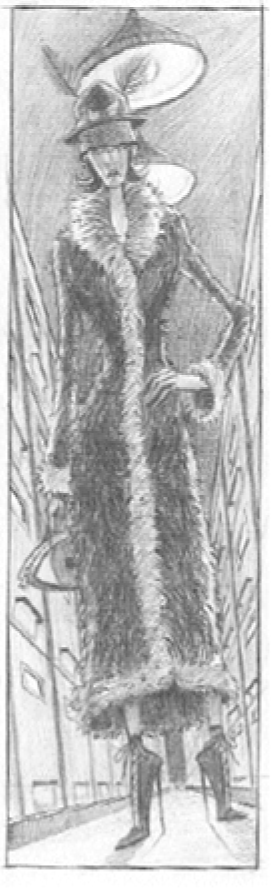
Page thirteen of the Baudelaire file was not a crowded sheet of paper—there was just one photograph stapled into place, below one sentence of type. But sometimes it takes only a photograph and a sentence to make an author cry himself to sleep even years after the photograph was taken, or to make three siblings sit and stare at a page for a long time, as if an entire book were printed on one sheet of paper.

There were four people in the photograph, standing together outside a building the Baudelaires recognized immediately. It was 667 Dark Avenue, where the orphans had lived with Jerome and Esmé Squalor for a brief time, until it became another place too treacherous for the children to stay. The first person in the photograph was Jacques Snicket, who was looking at the photographer and smiling. Standing next to Jacques was a man who was turned away from the camera, so the children could not see his face, only one of his hands, which was clutching a notebook and pen, as if the obscured man were a writer of some sort. The children had not seen Jacques Snicket since he was murdered, of course, and the writer appeared to be someone they had never seen at all. But standing next to these two people were another two people the Baudelaire children thought they would never see again. Bundled up in long coats, looking cold but happy, were the Baudelaire parents.

“Because of the evidence discussed on page nine,” read the sentence above the photograph, “experts now suspect that there may in fact be one survivor of the fire, but the survivor’s whereabouts are unknown.”

CHAPTER
Seven

"I never thought I'd live to see the day," Violet said, and took another look at page thirteen of the file. The Baudelaire parents looked back at her, and for a moment it seemed to Violet her father would step out of the photograph and say, "There you are, Ed. Where have you been?" Ed was short for Thomas Alva Edison, one of the greatest inventors of all time, and it was a special nickname only used by her father, but the man in the photograph did not move, of course, but only stood smiling in front of 667 Dark Avenue.



“Me neither,” Klaus said. “I never thought we’d see our parents again.” The middle Baudelaire looked at his mother’s coat, which had a secret pocket on the inside. In the secret pocket, she often kept a small pocket dictionary, which she would take out whenever she encountered a word she did not know. Because Klaus was so interested in reading, she had promised that someday she would give the pocket dictionary to him, and now it seemed to Klaus that his mother was about to reach into her coat and put the small, leatherbound book in his hand.

“Neither me,” Sunny said. She looked at her parents’ smiles, and suddenly remembered, for the first time since the fire, a song that her mother and father used to sing together, when it was time for Sunny to go to sleep. The song was called “The Butcher Boy,” and the Baudelaire parents would take turns singing the verses, her mother singing in her breathy, high voice, and her father in his, which was as low and deep as a foghorn. “The Butcher Boy” was the perfect way for Sunny to end the day, safe and cozy in the Baudelaire crib.

“This photograph must have been taken a long time ago,” Violet said. “Look how much younger they look. They aren’t even wearing their wedding rings.”

“‘Because of the evidence discussed on page nine,’” Klaus said, reading the sentence typed above the photograph, “‘experts now suspect that there may in fact be one survivor of the fire, but the survivor’s whereabouts are unknown.’” He stopped, and looked at his sisters. “What does that mean?” he said, in a very faint voice. “Does that mean one of our parents is still alive?”

“Well, well, well,” said a familiar and sneering voice, and the children heard the odd, tottering footsteps walk straight toward them. “Look what we have here.”

The Baudelaire orphans had been so shocked by what they had found that they had forgotten about the person breaking into the Library of Records, and now they looked up to see a tall, skinny figure walking down the B aisle STOP. It was a person they had seen recently, and one they had hoped never to see again. There are many different ways of describing this person, including “Count Olaf’s girlfriend,” “the Baudelaire children’s former guardian,” “the city’s sixth most important financial advisor,” “a former resident of 667 Dark Avenue,” and several phrases that are far too nasty to be placed in a book. But the name she preferred was the one that came snarling out of her lipsticked mouth.

“I am Esmé Gigi Geniveve Squalor,” said Esmé Gigi Geniveve Squalor, as if the Baudelaires would ever forget her, no matter how hard they tried. She stopped walking and stood in front of the Baudelaires, who saw immediately why her footsteps had been so odd and tottering. For as long as the children had known her, Esmé Squalor had been a slave to fashion, a phrase which here means “dressed in incredibly expensive, and often incredibly absurd, outfits.” This evening she was wearing a long coat made from the fur of a number of animals that had been killed in particularly unpleasant ways, and she was carrying a handbag shaped like an eye, just like the tattoo her boyfriend had on his left ankle. She wore a hat with a small veil that hung in front of her face, as if she had blown her nose with a black lacy handkerchief, and then forgotten to remove it, and on her feet she had a pair of shoes with stiletto heels. A stiletto is a small, slender knife resembling a dagger, such as might be carried by a carnival performer or a murderer, and the word “stiletto” has been used to describe a woman’s shoe with a very long and narrow heel. In this case, however, the phrase “shoes with stiletto heels” actually refers to a pair of shoes made with a small, slender knife where each heel should be. The stilettos were pointing straight down, so that Esmé viciously stabbed the floor of the Library of Records with each step, and occasionally the stilettos stuck, so the wicked woman had to pause and yank them out of the floor, which explained why her footsteps were so odd and tottering. These shoes happened to be the absolute latest fashion, but the Baudelaires had more important things to do than leaf through magazines describing what was in and what was out, so they could only stare at Esmé’s shoes and wonder why she was wearing footwear that was so violent and impractical.

“This is a pleasant surprise,” Esmé said. “Olaf asked me to break in here and destroy the Baudelaire file, but now we can destroy the Baudelaires as well.”

The children looked at each other in shock. “You and Olaf *know* about the file?” Violet asked.

Esmé laughed in a particularly nasty way, and, from behind her veil, smiled a particularly nasty smile. “Of course we know about it,” she snarled. “That’s why I’m here—to destroy all thirteen pages.” She took one odd, tottering step toward the Baudelaires. “That’s why we destroyed Jacques Snicket.” She took another stabbing step down the aisle. “And that’s why we’re going to destroy you.” She looked down at her shoe and shook her foot wildly to get the blade out of the library floor. “Heimlich Hospital is about to have three new patients,” she said, “but I’m afraid it’ll be too late for any doctor to save their lives.”

Klaus stood up, and followed his sisters as they began to step away from the slave to fashion who was moving slowly toward them. “Who survived the fire?” he asked Esmé, holding up the page from the file. “Is one of our parents alive?”

Esmé frowned, and teetered on her stiletto heels as she tried to snatch the page away. "*Did you read the file?*" she demanded in a terrible voice. "*What does the file say?*"

"You'll never find out!" Violet cried, and turned to her siblings. "Run!"

The Baudelaires ran, straight down the aisle past the rest of the B files, rounding the corner past the cabinet that read "Byron to Byzantine" and around to the section of the library where all of the C files were stored.

"We're running the wrong way," Klaus said.

"Egress," Sunny agreed, which meant something along the lines of, "Klaus is right—the exit is the other way."

"So is Esmé," Violet replied. "Somehow, we'll have to go around her."

"I'm coming for you!" Esmé cried, her voice coming over the top of the file cabinets. "You'll never escape, orphans!"

The Baudelaires paused at the cabinet reading "Conch to Condy's Fluid," which are a fancy seashell and a complex chemical compound, and listened as Esmé's heels clattered in pursuit.

"We're lucky she's wearing those ridiculous shoes," Klaus said. "We can run much faster than she can."

"As long as she doesn't think of taking them off," Violet said. "She's almost as clever as she is greedy."

"Shh!" Sunny said, and the Baudelaires listened as Esmé's footsteps abruptly stopped. The children huddled together as they heard Olaf's girlfriend mutter to herself for a moment, and then the three youngsters began to hear a terrifying sequence of sounds. There was a long, screechy *creak*, and then a booming *crash*, and then another long, screechy *creak*, and another booming *crash*, and the pair of sounds continued, getting louder and louder. The youngsters looked at one another in puzzlement, and then, just in the nick of time, the oldest Baudelaire figured out what the sound was.

“She’s knocking over the file cabinets!” Violet cried, pointing over the top of Confetti to Consecration. “They’re toppling over like dominos!”

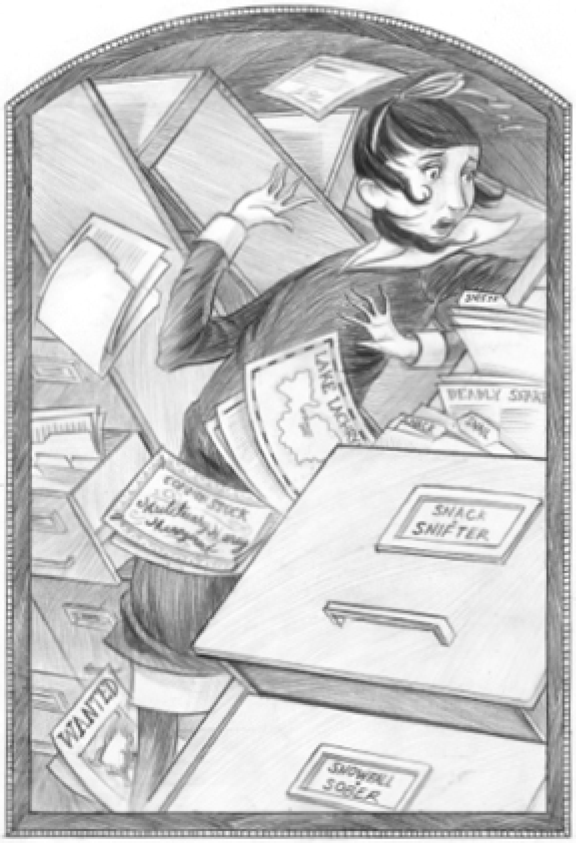
Klaus and Sunny looked where their sister was pointing and saw that she was right. Esmé had pushed over one file cabinet, which had pushed over another, which had pushed over another, and now the heavy metal cabinets were crashing toward the children like a wave crashing on the shore. Violet grabbed her siblings and pulled them out of the path of a falling file cabinet. With a *creak* and a *crash*, the cabinet fell to the floor, right where they had been standing. The three children breathed a sigh of relief, having just narrowly avoided being crushed beneath files on congruent triangles, coniferous trees, conjugated verbs, and two hundred other topics.

“I’m going to flatten you!” Esmé called, starting on another line of cabinets. “Olaf and I are going to have a romantic breakfast of Baudelaire pancakes!”

“Run!” Sunny cried, but her siblings needed no urging. The three children hurried down the rest of the C aisle, as the cabinets *creak*ed and *crash*ed all around them.

“Where can we go?” Violet cried.

“To the D aisle!” Klaus answered, but changed his mind as he saw another row of cabinets begin to topple. “No! The E aisle!”



“B?” Violet asked, finding it difficult to hear over the sounds of the cabinets.

“E!” Klaus cried. “E as in Exit!”

The Baudelaires ran down E as in Exit, but when they reached the last cabinet, the row was becoming F as in Falling File Cabinets, G as in Go the Other Way! and H as in How in the World Are We Going to Escape? Before long, the children found themselves as far from the anteroom door as they possibly could be. As the cabinets crashed around them, and Esmé cackled wildly and stabbed the floor in pursuit, the three youngsters found themselves in the area of the Library of Records where information was deposited. As the room *creak*ed and *crash*ed around them, the siblings looked first at the basket of papers, then at the bowl of paper clips, then the mouth of the chute, and finally at one another.

“Violet,” Klaus said hesitantly, “do you think you can invent something out of paper clips and a basket that could help us get out of here?”

“I don’t have to,” Violet said. “That chute will serve as an exit.”

“But you won’t fit in there,” Klaus said. “I’m not even sure I will.”

“You’re never going to get out of this room alive, you imbeciles!” Esmé cried, using a horrible word in her horrible voice.

“We’ll have to try,” Violet said. “Sunny, go first.”

“Prapil,” Sunny said doubtfully, but she went first, crawling easily into the chute and staring out through the darkness at her siblings.

“Now you, Klaus,” Violet said, and Klaus, removing his glasses so they wouldn’t break, followed his sister. It was a tight fit, and it took some manuevering, but eventually the middle Baudelaire worked his way through the mouth of the chute.

“This won’t work,” Klaus said to Violet, peering around him. “It’ll be tough to crawl up through the chute, the way it’s slanted. Besides, there’s no way you’ll fit.”

“Then I’ll find another way,” Violet said. Her voice was calm, but Klaus and Sunny could see, through the hole in the wall, that her eyes were wide with fear.

“That’s out of the question,” Klaus said. “We’ll climb back out, and the three of us will escape together.”

“We can’t risk it,” Violet said. “Esmé won’t catch all of us, not if we split up. You two take page thirteen and go up the chute, and I’ll get out another way. We’ll meet up in the unfinished wing.”

“No!” Sunny cried.

“Sunny’s right,” Klaus said. “This is what happened with the Quagmires, remember? When we left them behind, they were snatched away.”

“The Quagmires are safe now,” Violet reminded him. “Don’t worry, I’ll invent a solution.”

The eldest Baudelaire gave her siblings a small smile, and reached into her pocket so she could tie up her hair and put the levers and gears of her inventing mind into motion. But there was no ribbon in her pocket. As her trembling fingers explored her empty pocket, she remembered she had used her ribbon to fool Hal with a fake loop of keys. Violet felt a quiver in her stomach as she remembered, but she had no time to feel bad about the trick she had played. With sudden horror, she heard a *creak* right behind her, and she jumped out of the way just in time to avoid the *crash.* A file cabinet labeled “Linguistics to Lions” fell against the wall, blocking the mouth of the chute.

“Violet!” Sunny cried. She and her brother tried to push the cabinet aside, but the strength of a thirteen-year-old boy and his baby sister were no match against a metal case holding files on everything from the history of language to a large carnivorous feline found in sub-Saharan Africa and parts of India.

“I’m O.K.,” Violet called back.

“Not for long you’re not!” Esmé snarled, from a few aisles over.

Klaus and Sunny sat in the dark chute and heard their sister’s faint voice as she called to them. “Leave me here!” she insisted. “I’ll meet you back in our filthy, cold, inappropriate home.”

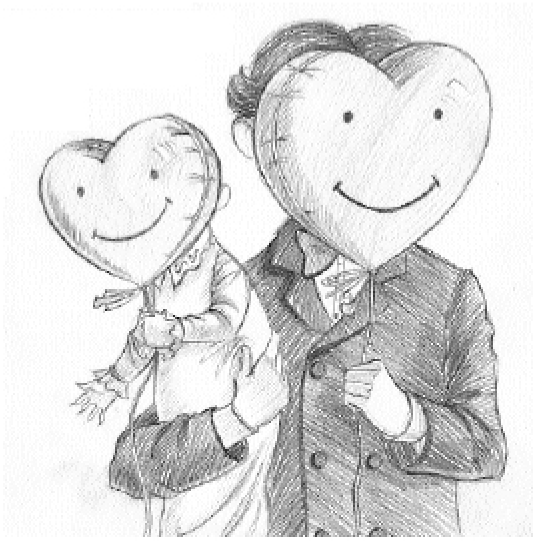
The two younger Baudelaires huddled together at the entrance of the chute, but it is useless for me to describe to you how desperate and terrified they felt. There is no reason to describe how horrible it was to hear Violet’s frantic footsteps across the Library of Records, or the odd, tottering ones of Esmé as she pursued the eldest Baudelaire in her stiletto heels, *creak*ing and *crash*ing file cabinets with every stabbing step. It is unnecessary to describe the cramped and difficult journey Klaus and Sunny made up the chute, which was slanted so steeply that it felt to the two orphans like they were crawling up a large mountain covered in ice instead of a fairly short chute used for depositing information. It is ineffectual to describe how the two children felt when they finally reached the end of the chute, which was another hole, carved into the outside wall of Heimlich Hospital, and found that Hal was right when he said it was to be a particularly cold evening. And it is absolutely futile—a word which here means “useless, unnecessary, and ineffectual, because there is no reason for it”—to describe how they felt as they sat in the half-finished section of the hospital, with dropcloths wrapped around them to keep them warm and flashlights lit around them to keep them company, and waited for Violet to show up, because Klaus and Sunny Baudelaire were not thinking of these things.

The two younger Baudelaires sat together, clutching page thirteen of the Baudelaire file, as the night grew later and later, but they were not thinking about the noises they heard coming from the Library of Records, or about the journey up the chute or even about the icy breeze as it blew through the plastic sheets and chilled the Baudelaire bones. Klaus and Sunny were thinking about what Violet had said, when she saw the piece of paper they were clutching now.

“I never thought I’d live to see the day,” Violet had said, and her two siblings knew that the phrase was just another way of saying “I’m very surprised” or “I’m extremely flabbergasted” or “This blows my mind beyond belief.” But now, as the two Baudelaires waited more and more anxiously for their sister, Klaus and Sunny began to fear that the phrase Violet used was more appropriate than she ever would have guessed. As the first pale rays of the morning sun began to shine on the unfinished half of the hospital, the Baudelaries grew more and more frightened that their sister would not live to see the day.

CHAPTER
Eight

Heimlich Hospital is gone now, and will probably never be rebuilt. If you want to visit it, you have to convince a farmer to let you borrow his mule, for nobody in the surrounding area is willing to go within twelve miles of its wreckage, and once you arrive you can hardly blame them. The few scraps of the building that have survived are covered with a thick and prickly type of ivy called kudzu, which makes it difficult to see what the hospital looked like when the Baudelaires first arrived in the V.F.D. van. The confusing maps have been gnawed off the walls of the sagging staircases, so it is very hard to imagine how troublesome it was to find one's way through all of the areas of the building. And the intercom system has long since crumbled away, with only a handful of square speakers left sitting among the ashen rubble, so it is impossible to imagine just how unnerving it was when Klaus and Sunny heard the latest announcement from Mattathias.



"Attention!" Mattathias announced. There were no intercom speakers installed in the unfinished half of the hospital, so the two younger Baudelaires had to listen very hard to hear the scratchy voice of their enemy coming from one of the outdoor speakers. "Attention! Attention! This is Mattathias, the Head of Human Resources. I am canceling the remainder of the hospital inspections. We have found what we were looking for." There was a pause as Mattathias moved away from the microphone, and as Klaus and Sunny listened very hard, they could hear the faint, faint noise of triumphant, high-pitched laughter coming from the Head of Human Resources.

"Excuse me," he continued, when his giggling fit was over. "To continue, please be aware that two of the three Baudelaire murderers—Klaus and Sun—I mean, Klyde and Susie Baudelaire—have been spotted in the hospital. If you see any children whom you recognize from *The Daily Punctilio,* please capture them and notify the police." Mattathias stopped talking and began to giggle again, until the children heard the voice of Esmé Squalor whispering, "Darling, you forgot to turn off the intercom." Then there was a click, and everything was silent.

"They caught her," Klaus said. Now that the sun had risen, it wasn't very cold in the half-finished section of the hospital, but the middle Baudelaire shivered nonetheless. "That's what Mattathias meant when he said that they had found what they were looking for."

“Danger,” Sunny said grimly.

“She certainly is,” Klaus said. “We have to rescue Violet before it’s too late.”

“Virm,” Sunny said, which meant “But we don’t know where she is.”

“She must be somewhere in the hospital,” Klaus said, “otherwise Mattathias wouldn’t still be here. He and Esmé are probably hoping to capture us, too.”

“Rance,” Sunny said.

“And the file,” Klaus agreed, taking page thirteen out of his pocket, where he had been storing it for safekeeping along with the scraps of the Quagmire notebooks. “Come on, Sunny. We’ve got to find our sister and get her out of there.”

“Lindersto,” Sunny said. She meant “That’ll be tough. We’ll have to wander around the hospital looking for her, while other people will be wandering around the hospital, looking for us.”

“I know,” Klaus said glumly. “If anyone recognizes us from *The Daily Punctilio*, we’ll be in jail before we can help Violet.”

“Disguise?” Sunny said.

“I don’t know how,” Klaus said, looking around the half-finished room. “All we have here is some flashlights and a few dropcloths. I suppose if we wrapped the dropcloths around us and put the flashlights on top of our heads, we could try to disguise ourselves as piles of construction materials.”

“Gidoost,” Sunny said, which meant “But piles of construction materials don’t wander around hospitals.”

“Then we’ll have to walk into the hospital without disguises,” Klaus said. “We’ll just have to be extra careful.”

Sunny nodded emphatically, a word which here means “as if she thought being extra careful was a very good plan,” and Klaus nodded emphatically back. But as they left the half-finished wing of the hospital, the two children felt less and less emphatic about what they were doing. Ever since that terrible day at the beach, when Mr. Poe brought them news of the fire, all three Baudelaires had been extra careful all of the time. They had been extra careful when they lived with Count Olaf, and Sunny had still ended up dangling from a cage outside Olaf’s tower room. They had been extra careful when they’d worked at the Lucky Smells Lumbermill, and Klaus had still ended up hypnotized by Dr. Orwell. And now the Baudelaires had been as careful as they could possibly be, but the hospital had turned out to be as hostile an environment as anywhere the three children had ever lived. But just as Klaus and Sunny entered the finished half of Heimlich Hospital, their feet moving less and less emphatically and their hearts beating faster and faster, they heard something that soothed their savage breasts:

“We are Volunteers Fighting Disease,
And we’re cheerful all day long.
If someone said that we were sad,
That person would be wrong.”

There, coming around the corner, were the Volunteers Fighting Disease, walking down the hall singing their cheerful song and carrying enormous bunches of heart-shaped balloons. Klaus and Sunny looked at one another, and ran to catch up with the group. What better place to hide than among people who believed that no news was good news, and so didn’t read the newspaper?

“We visit people who are sick,
And try to make them smile,
Even if their noses bleed,
Or if they cough up bile.”

To the children’s relief, the volunteers paid no attention as Klaus and Sunny infiltrated the group, a phrase which here means “sneaked into the middle of a singing crowd.” An especially cheerful singer seemed to be the only one who noticed, and she immediately handed a balloon to each newcomer. Klaus and Sunny held the balloons in front of their faces, so that anybody passing by would see two volunteers with shiny, helium-filled hearts, instead of two accused criminals hiding in V.F.D.

“Tra la la, Fiddle dee dee,
Hope you get well soon.
Ho ho ho, hee hee hee,
Have a heart-shaped balloon.”

As the volunteers reached the chorus of the song, they marched into a hospital room in order to start giving a cheerful attitude to the patients. Inside the room, each lying uncomfortably in a metal bed, were a man with both legs in casts and a woman with both arms in bandages. Still singing, a man from V.F.D. handed one balloon to the man and tied another to the woman’s cast, because she could not hold it with her broken arms.

“Excuse me,” said the man hoarsely, “could you please call a nurse for me? I was supposed to take some painkillers this morning, but nobody has come to give them to me.”

“And I’d like a glass of water,” the woman said in a weak voice, “if it’s not too much trouble.”

“Sorry,” the bearded man replied, pausing for a moment to tune his guitar. “We don’t have time to do things like that. We have to visit each and every room of the hospital, so we need to move quickly.”

“Besides,” another volunteer said, giving the two patients a huge grin, “a cheerful attitude is a more effective way of fighting illness than painkillers, or a glass of water. So cheer up, and enjoy your balloon.” The volunteer consulted a list he was holding. “Next on the patient list is a man named Bernard Rieux, in room 105 of the Plague Ward. Come on, brothers and sisters.”

The members of V.F.D. cheered, and continued the song as they left the room. Klaus and Sunny peered around the balloons they were holding and looked at one another in hope.

"If we visit each and every room in the hospital," Klaus whispered to his sister, "we're sure to find Violet."

"Mushulm," Sunny said, which meant "I agree, although it won't be pleasant to see all these sick people."

"We visit people who are ill,
And try to make them laugh,
Even when the doctor says
He must saw them in half."

Bernard Rieux turned out to be a man with a nasty, hacking cough that shook his body so much he could scarcely hold his balloon, and it seemed to the two Baudelaire children that a good humidifier would have been a more effective way to fight this disease than a cheerful attitude. As the members of V.F.D. drowned out his cough with another verse of the song, Klaus and Sunny were tempted to run and find a humidifier and bring it back to Bernard Rieux's room, but they knew that Violet was in much more danger than someone with a cough, so they stayed hidden in the group.

"We sing and sing all night and day,
And then we sing some more.
We sing to boys with broken bones
And girls whose throats are sore."

The next patient on the list was Cynthia Vane, a young woman with a terrible toothache who probably would have preferred something cold and easy to eat, instead of a heart-shaped balloon, but as sore as her mouth looked, the children dared not run and find her applesauce or an ice-cream snack. They knew she might have read *The Daily Punctilio,* in order to pass the hours in the hospital room, and might recognize them if they showed their faces.

"Tra la la, Fiddle dee dee,
Hope you get well soon.
Ho ho ho, hee hee hee,
Have a heart-shaped balloon."

On and on the volunteers marched, and Klaus and Sunny marched with them, but with every *ho ho ho* and *hee hee hee* their hearts sank lower and lower. The two Baudelaires followed the members of V.F.D. up and down the staircases of the hospital, and although they saw a great number of confusing maps, intercom speakers, and sick people, they did not catch a glimpse of their sister. They visited Room 201 and sang to Jonah Mapple, who was suffering from seasickness, and they gave a heart-shaped balloon to Charley Anderson in Room 714, who had injured himself in an accident, and they visited Clarissa Dalloway, who did not seem to have anything wrong with her but was staring sadly out the window of Room 1308, but nowhere, in any of the rooms that the volunteers marched into, was Violet Baudelaire, who, Klaus and Sunny feared, was suffering more than any of the other patients.

"Ceyune," Sunny said, as the volunteers walked up yet another staircase. She meant something along the lines of "We've been wandering around the hospital all morning, and we're no closer to rescuing our sister," and Klaus nodded grimly in agreement.

"I know," Klaus said, "but the members of V.F.D. are going to visit every single person in Heimlich Hospital. We're sure to find Violet eventually."

"Attention! Attention!" a voice announced, and the volunteers stopped singing and gathered around the nearest intercom speaker to hear what Mattathias had to say. "Attention!" Mattathias said. "Today is a very important day in the history of the hospital. In precisely one hour, a doctor here will perform the world's first cranioectomy on a fourteen-year-old girl. We all hope that this very dangerous operation is a complete success. That is all."

"Violet," Sunny murmured to her brother.

"I think so, too," Klaus said. "And I don't like the sound of that operation. 'Cranio' means 'head,' and 'ectomy' is a medical term for removing something."

"Decap?" Sunny asked in a horrified whisper. She meant something like "Do you think they're going to cut off Violet's head?"

"I don't know," Klaus said with a shudder, "but we can't wander around with these singing volunteers any longer. We've got to find her right away."

"O.K.," a volunteer called, consulting the list. "The next patient is Emma Bovary in Room 2611. She has food poisoning, so she needs a particularly cheerful attitude."

"Excuse me, brother," Klaus said to the volunteer, reluctantly using the term "brother" instead of "person I hardly know." "I was wondering if I could borrow your copy of the patient list."

"Of course," the volunteer replied. "I don't like to read all these names of sick people, anyway. It's too depressing. I'd rather hold balloons." With a cheerful smile, the volunteer handed Klaus the long list of patients, and took the heart-shaped balloon out of his hands as the bearded man began the next verse of the song.

"We sing to men with measles,
And to women with the flu,
And if you breathe in deadly germs,
We'll probably sing to you."

With his face exposed, Klaus had to duck down behind Sunny's balloon to look at the list of the hospital's patients. "There are hundreds of people on this list," he said to his sister, "and it's organized by ward, not by name. We can't read it all here in the hallway, particularly when we both have to hide behind one balloon."

"Damajat," Sunny said, pointing down the hall. By "Damajat," she meant something along the lines of "Let's hide in that supply closet over there," and sure enough, there was a door marked "Supply Closet" at the end of the hallway, past two doctors who had paused to chat beside one of the confusing maps. While the members of V.F.D. started in on the chorus of their song as they walked toward Emma Bovary's room, Klaus and Sunny separated themselves from the volunteers and walked carefully toward the closet, holding the balloon in front of both their faces as best they could. Luckily, the two doctors were too busy talking about a sporting event they had watched on television to notice two accused murderers sneaking down the hallway of their hospital, and by the time the volunteers were singing

"Tra la la, Fiddle dee dee,
Hope you get well soon.
Ho ho ho, hee hee hee,
Have a heart-shaped balloon."

Klaus and Sunny were inside the closet.

Like a church bell, a coffin, and a vat of melted chocolate, a supply closet is rarely a comfortable place to hide, and this supply closet was no exception. When they shut the door of the closet behind them, the two younger Baudelaires found themselves in a small, cramped room lit only by one flickering lightbulb hanging from the ceiling. On one wall was a row of white medical coats hanging from hooks, and on the opposite wall was a rusty sink where one could wash one's hands before examining a patient. The rest of the closet was full of huge cans of alphabet soup for patients' lunches, and small boxes of rubber bands, which the children could not imagine came in very handy in a hospital.

"Well," Klaus said, "it's not comfortable, but at least nobody will find us in here."

"Pesh," Sunny said, which meant something like "At least, until somebody needs rubber bands, alphabet soup, white medical coats, or clean hands."

“Well, let’s keep one eye on the door, to see if anyone comes in,” Klaus said, “but let’s keep the other eye on this list. It’s very long, but now that we have a few moments to look it over, we should be able to spot Violet’s name.”

“Right,” Sunny said. Klaus placed the list on top of a can of soup, and hurriedly began to flip through its pages. As he had noticed, the list of patients was not organized alphabetically, but by ward, a word which here means “particular section of the hospital,” so the two children had to look through every single page, hoping to spot the name Violet Baudelaire among the typed names of sick people. But as they glanced at the list under the heading “Sore Throat Ward,” perused the names on the “Broken Neck Ward” page, and combed through the names of all the people who were staying in the Ward for People with Nasty Rashes, Klaus and Sunny felt as if they were in a Ward for People with Sinking Stomachs, because Violet’s name was nowhere to be found. As the lightbulb flickered above them, the two Baudelaires looked frantically at page after page of the list, but they found nothing that would help them locate their sister.

“She’s not here,” Klaus said, putting down the last page of “Pneumonia Ward.” “Violet’s name is nowhere on the list. How are we going to find her in this huge hospital, if we can’t figure out what ward she’s in?”

“Alias,” Sunny said, which meant “Maybe she’s listed under a different name.”

“That’s true,” Klaus said, looking at the list again. “After all, Mattathias’s real name is Count Olaf. Maybe he made up a new name for Violet, so we couldn’t rescue her. But which person is really Violet? She could be anyone from Mikhail Bulgakov to Haruki Murakami. What are we going to do? Somewhere in this hospital, they’re getting ready to perform a completely unnecessary operation on our sister, and we—”

Klaus was interrupted by the sound of crackly laughter, coming from over the Baudelaires’ heads. The two children looked up and saw that a square intercom speaker had been installed on the ceiling. “Attention!” said Mattathias, when he was done laughing. “Dr. Flacutono, please report to the

Surgical Ward. Dr. Flacutono, please report to the Surgical Ward to prepare for the cranioectomy."

"Flacutono!" Sunny repeated.

"I recognize that name, too," Klaus said. "That's the false name used by Count Olaf's associate when we lived in Paltryville."

"Tiofreck!" Sunny said frantically. She meant "Violet's in grave danger—we have to find her immediately," but Klaus did not answer. Behind his glasses, his eyes were half closed, as they often were when he was trying to remember something he had read.

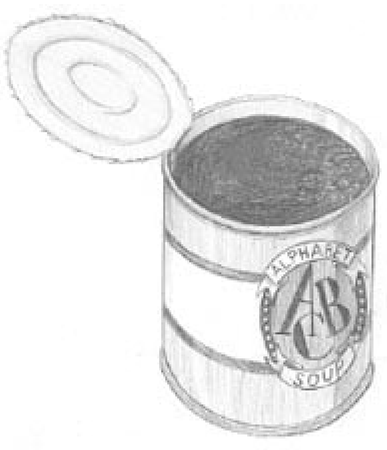
"Flacutono," he muttered quietly. "Flac-uto-no." Then he reached into his pocket, where he was keeping all the important papers the Baudelaires had gathered. "Al Funcoot," he said, and took out one of the pages of the Quagmire notebooks. It was the page that had written on it the words "Ana Gram"—a phrase that had not made any sense to the Baudelaires when they had looked at the pages together. Klaus looked at the Quagmire page, and then at the list of patients, and then at the page again. Then he looked at Sunny, and she could see his eyes grow wide behind his glasses, the way they always did when he had read something very difficult, and understood it at last.

"I think I know how to find Violet," Klaus said slowly, "but we'll need your teeth, Sunny."

"Ready," Sunny said, opening her mouth.

Klaus smiled, and pointed to the stack of cans in the supply closet. "Open one of those cans of alphabet soup," he said, "and hurry."

CHAPTER
Nine



“Recazier?” Sunny asked dumbfoundedly. The word “dumbfoundedly” here means “wondering why in the world Klaus wanted to eat alphabet soup at a time like this,” and “Recazier?” here means “Klaus, why in the world do you want to eat alphabet soup at a time like this?”

“We’re not going to eat it,” Klaus said, handing Sunny one of the cans. “We’re going to pour just about all of it down the sink.”

“Pietrisycamollaviadelrechiotemexity,” Sunny said, which you will probably recall means something along the lines of “I must admit I don’t have the faintest idea of what is going on.” Sunny had now said this particular thing three times over the course of her life, and she was beginning to wonder if this was something she was only going to say more and more as she grew older.

“The last time you said that,” Klaus said with a smile, “the three of us were trying to figure out the pages the Quagmires left behind.” He held out a page for Sunny to see, and then pointed to the words “Ana Gram.” “We thought this was someone’s name,” Klaus said, “but it’s really a kind of code. An anagram is when you move the letters around in one or more words to make another word or words."

"Still pietrisycamollaviadelrechiotemexity," Sunny said with a sigh.

"I'll give you an example," Klaus said. "It's the example the Quagmires found. Look, on the same page they wrote 'Al Funcoot.' That's the name of the man who wrote *The Marvelous Marriage*, that dreadful play Count Olaf forced us to participate in."

"Yuck," Sunny said, which meant "Don't remind me."

"But look," Klaus said. "'Al Funcoot' has all the same letters as 'Count Olaf.' Olaf just rearranged the letters in his name to hide the fact that he really wrote the play himself. You see?"

"Phromein," Sunny said, which meant something like "I think I understand, but it's difficult for someone as young as myself."

"It's difficult for me, too," Klaus said. "That's why the alphabet soup will come in handy. Count Olaf uses anagrams when he wants to hide something, and right now he's hiding our sister. I bet she's somewhere on this list, but her name's been scrambled up. The soup is going to help unscramble her."

"But how?" Sunny asked.

"It's difficult to figure out anagrams if you can't move the letters around," Klaus said. "Normally, alphabet blocks or lettered tiles would be perfect, but alphabet noodles will do in a pinch. Now, hurry and open a can of soup."

Sunny grinned, showing all of her sharp, sharp teeth, and then swung her head down onto the can of soup, remembering the day she had learned to open cans all by herself. It was not that long ago, although it felt like it was in the very distant past, because it was before the Baudelaire mansion burned down, when the entire family was happy and together. It was the Baudelaires' mother's birthday, and she was sleeping late while everyone baked a cake for her. Violet was beating the eggs, butter, and sugar with a mixing device she had invented herself. Klaus was sifting the flour with the cinnamon, pausing every few minutes to wipe his glasses. And the Baudelaires' father was making his famous cream-cheese frosting, which would be spread thickly on top of the cake. All was going well until the electric can opener broke, and Violet didn't have the proper tools to fix it. The Baudelaires' father desperately needed to open a can of condensed milk to make his frosting, and for a moment it looked like the cake was going to be ruined. But Sunny—who had been playing quietly on the floor this whole time—said her first word, "Bite," and bit down on the can, poking four small holes so the sweet, thick milk could pour out. The Baudelaires laughed and applauded, and the children's mother came downstairs, and from then on they used Sunny whenever they needed to open a can of anything, except for beets. Now, as the youngest Baudelaire bit along the edge of the can of alphabet soup, she wondered if one of her parents had really survived the fire, and if she dared get her hopes up just because of one sentence on page thirteen of the Snicket file. Sunny wondered if the Baudelaire family would ever be together again, laughing and clapping and working together to make something sweet and delicious.

"All done," Sunny said finally.

"Good work, Sunny," Klaus said. "Now, let's try to find alphabet noodles that spell Violet's name."

"V?" Sunny asked.

"That's right," Klaus said. "V-I-O-L-E-TB-A-U-D-E-L-A-I-R-E."

The two younger Baudelaires reached into the can of soup and sorted through the diced carrots, chopped celery, blanched potatoes, roasted peppers, and steamed peas, which were all in a rich and creamy broth made from a secret blend of herbs and spices, to find the noodles they needed. The soup was cold from sitting in the closet for months and months, and occasionally they would find the right letter only to have it fall into pieces, or slip from their clammy fingers back into the can, but before too long they had found a V, an I, an O, an L, an E, a T, a B, an A, a U, a D, another E, another L, another A, another I, an R, and a bit of carrot they decided to use when a third E was not to be found.

“Now,” Klaus said, after they laid all of the noodles on top of another can so they could move them around. “Let’s take another look at the list of patients. Mattathias announced that the operation would take place in the Surgical Ward, so let’s look in that section of the list, and try to see if any names look like good bets.”

Sunny poured the rest of soup into the sink and nodded in agreement, and Klaus hurriedly found the Surgical Ward section of the list and read the names of the patients:

LISA N. LOOTNDAY

ALBERT E. DEVILOEIA

LINDA RHALDEEN

ADA O. ÜBERVILLET

ED VALIANTBRUE

LAURA V. BLEEDIOTIE

MONTY KENSICLE

NED H. RIRGER

ERIQ BLUTHETTS

RUTH DËRCROUMP

AL BRISNOW

CARRIE E. ABELABUDITE

“Goodness!” Klaus said. “Every single patient on the list has a name that looks like an anagram. How in the world can we sort through all these names before it’s too late?”

“V!” Sunny said.

“You’re right,” Klaus said. “Any name that doesn’t have a V in it can’t be an anagram of ‘Violet Baudelaire.’ We could cross those off the list—if we had a pen, that is.”

Sunny reached thoughtfully into one of the white medical coats, wondering what doctors might keep in their pockets. She found a surgical mask, which is perfect for covering one’s face, and a pair of rubber gloves, that are perfect for protecting one’s hands, and at the very bottom of the pocket she found a ballpoint pen, which is perfect for crossing out names which aren’t the anagrams you’re looking for. With a grin, Sunny handed the pen to Klaus, who quickly crossed out the names without Vs. Now the list looked like this:

~~LISA N. LOOTNDAY~~

ALBERT E. DEVILOEIA

~~LINDA RHALDEEN~~

ADA O. ÜBERVILLET

ED VALIANTBRUE

LAURA V. BLEEDIOTIE

~~MONTY KENSICLE~~

~~NED H. RIRGER~~

~~ERIQ BLUTHETTS~~

~~RUTH DËRCROUMP~~

~~AL BRISNOW~~

~~CARRIE E. ABELABUDITE~~

“That makes it much easier,” Klaus said. “Now, let’s move around the letters in Violet’s name and see if we can spell out ‘Albert E. Deviloeia.’”

Working carefully to avoid breaking them, Klaus began to move the noodles he and Sunny had taken out of the soup, and soon learned that ‘Albert E. Deviloeia’ and “Violet Baudelaire” were not quite anagrams. They were close, but they did not have the exact same letters in their names.

“Albert E. Deviloeia must be an actual sick person,” Klaus said in disappointment. “Let’s try to spell out ‘Ada O. Übervillet.’”

Once again, the supply closet was filled with the sound of shifting noodles, a faint and damp sound that made the children think of something slimy emerging from a swamp. It was, however, a far nicer sound than the one that interrupted their anagram decoding.

“Attention! Attention!” Mattathias’s voice sounded particularly snide as it called for attention from the square speaker over the Baudelaires’ heads. “The Surgical Ward will now be closed for the cranioectomy. Only Dr. Flacutono and his associates will be allowed into the ward until the patient is dead—I mean, until the operation is over. That is all.”

“Velocity!” Sunny shrieked.

“I *know* we have to hurry!” Klaus cried. “I’m moving these noodles as quickly as I can! Ada O. Übervillet isn’t right, either!” He turned to the list of patients again to see who was next, and accidentally hit a noodle with his elbow, knocking it to the floor with a moist *splat.* Sunny picked it up for him, but the fall had split it into two pieces. Instead of an O, the Baudelaires now had a pair of parentheses.

“That’s O.K.,” Klaus said hurriedly. “The next name on the list is Ed Valiantbrue, which doesn’t have an O in it anyway.”

“O!” Sunny shrieked.

“O!” Klaus agreed.

“O!” Sunny insisted.

“Oh!” Klaus cried. “I see what you mean! If it doesn’t have an O in it, it can’t be an anagram of Violet Baudelaire. That only leaves one name on the list: Laura V. Bleediotie. That must be the one we’re looking for.”

“Check!” Sunny said, and held her breath as Klaus moved the noodles around. In a few seconds, the name of the eldest Baudelaire sister had been transformed into Laura V. Bleediotie, except for the O, which Sunny still held in pieces in her tiny fist, and the last E, which was still a piece of carrot.

“It’s her, all right,” Klaus said, with a grin of triumph. “We’ve found Violet.”

“Asklu,” Sunny said, which meant “We never would have found her if you hadn’t figured out that Olaf was using anagrams.”

“It was really the Quagmire triplets who figured it out,” Klaus said, holding up the notebook page, “and it was you who opened the cans of soup, which made it much easier. But before we congratulate ourselves, let’s rescue our sister.” Klaus took a look at the list of patients. “We’ll find ‘Laura V. Bleediotie’ in Room 922 of the Surgical Ward.”

“Gwito,” Sunny pointed out, which meant “But Mattathias closed the Surgical Ward.”

“Then we’ll have to open it,” Klaus said grimly, and took a good look around the supply closet. “Let’s put on those white medical coats,” he said. “Maybe if we look like doctors, we can get into the ward. We can use these surgical masks in the pocket to hide our faces—just like Olaf’s associate did at the lumbermill.”

“Quagmire,” Sunny said doubtfully, which meant “When the Quagmires used disguises, they didn’t fool Olaf.”

“But when Olaf used disguises,” Klaus said, “he fooled everyone.”

“Us,” Sunny said.

“Except us,” Klaus agreed, “but we don’t have to fool ourselves.”

“True,” Sunny said, and reached for two white coats. Because most doctors are adults, the white coats were far too big for the children, who were reminded of the enormous pinstripe suits Esmé Squalor had purchased for them when she had been their guardian. Klaus helped Sunny roll up the sleeves of her coat, and Sunny helped Klaus tie his mask around his face, and in a few moments the children were finished putting on their disguises.

“Let’s go,” Klaus said, and put his hand on the door of the supply closet. But he did not open it. Instead he turned back to his sister, and the two Baudelaires looked at each other. Even though the siblings were wearing white coats, and had surgical masks on their faces, they did not look like doctors. They looked like two children in white coats with surgical masks on their faces. Their disguises looked spurious—a word which here means “nothing at all like a real doctor”—and yet they were no more spurious than the disguises that Olaf had been using since his first attempt to steal the Baudelaire fortune. Klaus and Sunny looked at one another and hoped that Olaf’s methods would work for them, and help them steal their sister, and without another word, they opened the door and stepped out of the supply closet.

“Douth?” Sunny asked, which meant “But how are we going to find the Surgical Ward, when the maps of this hospital are so confusing?”

“We’ll have to find someone who is going there,” Klaus said. “Look for somebody who looks like they’re on their way to the Surgical Ward.”

“Silata,” Sunny said. She meant something along the lines of “But there are so many people here,” and she was right. Although the Volunteers Fighting Disease were nowhere to be seen, the hallways of Heimlich Hospital were full of people. A hospital needs many different people and many different types of equipment in order to work properly, and as Klaus and Sunny tried to find the Surgical Ward they saw all sorts of hospital employees and devices hurrying through the halls. There were physicians carrying stethoscopes, hurrying to listen to people’s heartbeats, and there were obstetricians carrying babies, hurrying to deliver people’s children. There were radiologists carrying X-ray machines, hurrying to view people’s insides, and there were optic surgeons carrying laser-driven technology, hurrying to get inside people’s views. There were nurses carrying hypodermic needles, hurrying to give people shots, and there were administrators carrying clipboards, hurrying to catch up on important paperwork. But no matter where the Baudelaires looked, they couldn’t see anyone who seemed to be hurrying to the Surgical Ward.

“I don’t see any surgeons,” Klaus said in desperation.

“Peipix,” Sunny said, which meant “Me neither.”

“Out of my way, everybody!” demanded a voice at the end of the hallway. “I’m a surgical assistant, carrying equipment for Dr. Flacutono!”

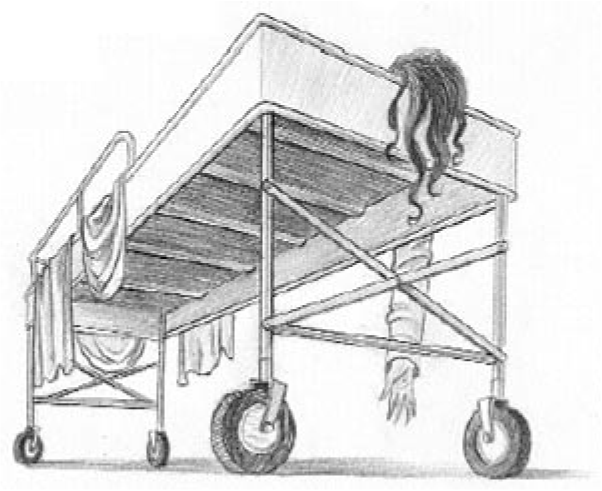
The other employees of the hospital stopped and cleared the way for the person who had spoken, a tall person dressed in a white lab coat and a surgical mask who was coming down the hallway in odd, tottering steps.

“I’ve got to get to the Surgical Ward right away!” the person called, walking past the Baudelaires without even glancing at them. But Klaus and Sunny glanced at this person. They saw, beneath the bottom hem of the white coat, the pair of shoes with stiletto heels that this person was wearing, and they saw the handbag in the shape of an eye that the person was holding in one hand. The children saw the black veil of the person’s hat, which was hanging in front of the surgical mask, and they saw blotches of lipstick, which had soaked through from the person’s lips and were staining the bottom of the mask.

The person, of course, was pretending to be a surgical assistant, and she was carrying something that was pretending to be a piece of surgical equipment, but the children did not need more than a glance to see through both of these spurious disguises. As they watched the person tottering down the hallway, the two Baudelaires knew at once that she was really Esmé Squalor, the villainous girlfriend of Count Olaf. And as they looked at the thing she was carrying, glinting in the light of the hospital hallway, the two Baudelaires knew that it was nothing more than a large rusty knife, with a long row of jagged teeth, just perfect for a cranioectomy.

CHAPTER Ten

At this point in the dreadful story I am writing, I must interrupt for a moment and describe something that happened to a good friend of mine named Mr. Sirin. Mr. Sirin was a lepidopterist, a word which usually means "a person who studies butterflies."



In this case, however, the word "lepidopterist" means "a man who was being pursued by angry government officials," and on the night I am telling you about they were right on his heels. Mr. Sirin looked back to see how close they were—four officers in their bright-pink uniforms, with small flashlights in their left hands and large nets in their right—and realized that in a moment they would catch up, and arrest him and his six favorite butterflies, which were frantically flapping alongside him. Mr. Sirin did not care much if he was captured—he had been in prison four and a half times over the course of his long and complicated life—but he cared very much about the butterflies. He realized that these six delicate insects would undoubtedly perish in bug prison, where poisonous spiders, stinging bees, and other criminals would rip them to shreds. So, as the secret police closed in, Mr. Sirin opened his mouth as wide as he could and swallowed all six butterflies whole, quickly placing them in the dark but safe confines of his empty stomach. It was not a pleasant feeling to have these six insects living inside him, but Mr. Sirin kept them there for three years, eating only the lightest foods served in prison so as not to crush the insects with a clump of broccoli or a baked potato. When his prison sentence was over, Mr. Sirin burped up the grateful butterflies and resumed his lepidoptery work in a community that was much more friendly to scientists and their specimens.

I am telling you this story not just to reveal the courage and imagination of one of my dearest friends, but to help you imagine how Klaus and Sunny felt as they watched Esmé Squalor, disguised as an associate of Dr. Flacutono, walk down the hallway of Heimlich Hospital carrying the long, rusty knife disguised as a surgical tool to be used on Violet. The two youngsters realized that their only chance of finding the Surgical Ward and rescuing their sister was to try and fool this greedy and stiletto-heeled villain, but as they approached her, like Mr. Sirin during his fifth and final prison sentence, the two Baudelaires felt the unpleasant fluttering of butterflies in their stomachs.

“Excuse me, ma’am,” Klaus said, trying to sound less like a thirteen-year-old boy and more like someone who had graduated from medical school. “Did you say you were an associate of Dr. Flacutono?”

“If you’re someone with a hearing problem,” Esmé said rudely, “don’t bother me. Go to the Ear Ward.”

“I’m not someone with a hearing problem,” Klaus said. “This woman and I are associates of Dr. Flacutono.”

Esmé stopped in the middle of stabbing the floor, and stared down at the two siblings. Klaus and Sunny could see her eyes shining behind the veil of her fashionable hat as she regarded the children before replying.

“I was just wondering where you were,” she said. “Come along with me, and I’ll take you to the patient.”

“Patsy,” Sunny said.

“What she is saying,” Klaus said quickly, “is that we’re very concerned about Laura V. Bleediotie.”

“Well, you won’t be concerned for long,” Esmé replied, leading the children around a corner to another hallway. “Here, you carry the knife.”

The evil girlfriend handed Klaus the rusty blade, and leaned in closely to talk with him. “I’m glad you two are here,” she whispered. “The brat’s little brother and sister haven’t been captured yet, and we still don’t have the file on the Snicket fires. The authorities removed it for their investigation. The boss says we might have to torch the place.”

“Torch?” Sunny asked.

“Mattathias will take care of that part,” Esmé said, looking around the hallway to make sure no one could hear them. “All you have to do is assist with the surgery. Let’s hurry up.”

Esmé walked up a stairway as fast as her shoes could carry her, and the children followed nervously behind her, Klaus holding the rusty, jagged knife. With every door they opened, every hallway they walked down, and every staircase they ascended, the youngsters were afraid that at any moment Esmé would see through their disguises and realize who they were. But the greedy woman was too busy pausing to yank the blades of the stiletto heels out of the floor to notice that the two additional associates of Dr. Flacutono bore a very strong resemblance to the children she was trying to capture. Finally, Esmé led the Baudelaires to a door marked “Surgical Ward,” which was being guarded by someone the children recognized at once. The guard was wearing a coat which read “Heimlich Hospital” and a cap that had the word “GUARD” printed on it in big black print, but Klaus and Sunny could see that this was another spurious disguise. The siblings had seen this person at Damocles Dock, when poor Aunt Josephine had been their guardian, and they’d had to cook for this person when they’d been living with Count Olaf. The spurious guard was an enormous person who looked like neither a man nor a woman, and who had been assisting Count Olaf with his nefarious schemes for as long as the Baudelaires had been escaping from them. The person looked at the children, and the children look back at him or her, certain that they would be recognized. But Olaf's assistant merely nodded and opened the door.

"They've already anesthetized the bratty orphan," Esmé said, "so you ladies merely need to go to her room and bring her to the operating theater. I'm going to try to find that sniveling bookworm and that stupid baby with the oversized teeth. Mattathias says I get to choose which one to keep alive in order to force Mr. Poe to give us the fortune, and which one I get to rip to shreds."

"Good," Klaus said, trying to sound fierce and villainous. "I'm so tired of chasing those kids around."

"Me, too," Esmé said, and the enormous assistant nodded in agreement. "But I'm sure this will be the last time. Once we've destroyed the file, nobody can accuse us of any crimes, and once we murder the orphans, the fortune will be ours."

The villainous woman paused and looked around her to make sure no one was listening, and then, satisfied that no one could hear her, she laughed wildly in triumph. The enormous assistant laughed, too, an odd laugh that sounded like a squeal and a howl at the same time, and the two Baudelaire youngsters tilted back their masked faces and made noises as if they were laughing, too, although their laughter was as spurious as their disguises. Klaus and Sunny felt more like being sick than laughing as they pretended to be as greedy and evil as Count Olaf and his troupe. It had never occurred to the children how these terrible people acted when they didn't have to pretend to be nice, and the two siblings were horrified to hear all the bloodthirsty things Esmé had said. Watching Esmé and the enormous assistant laugh together made the butterflies in the Baudelaire stomachs flutter all the more, and the youngsters were relieved when Esmé finally stopped laughing, and ushered the children into the Surgical Ward.

"I'll leave you ladies in the hands of our associates," she said, and the Baudelaires immediately saw with horror what she meant. Esmé shut the door behind them, and the children found themselves facing two more of Count Olaf's wicked associates.

"Well, hello there," the first one said in a sinister voice, pointing at the two children with an odd-looking hand. One of the fingers was curved at an odd angle while the others hung limp, like socks hung out to dry, and Klaus and Sunny could see at once that this was the associate of Olaf who had hooks instead of hands, wearing rubber gloves to hide his unusual and dangerous appendages. Behind him was a man whose hands were not as familiar, but Klaus and Sunny recognized him just as easily, due to the hideous wig he was wearing on his head. The wig was so limp, white, and curly that it looked like a heap of dead worms, which is not the sort of wig one forgets. The children had certainly not forgotten it from when they had been living in Paltryville, and realized at once that this person was the bald man with the long nose who had been assisting Count Olaf since the Baudelaires' troubles began. The hook-handed man and the bald man with the long nose were among the nastiest members of Olaf's troupe, but unlike the majority of nasty people of this earth, they were also quite clever, and the two young siblings felt the butterfly feeling in their stomachs increase exponentially—a phrase which here means "get much, much worse"—as they waited to see if these two associates were clever enough to see through the children's disguises.

"I can see through your disguise," the hook-handed man continued, and placed one of his spurious hands on Klaus's shoulder.

"Me, too," the bald man said, "but I don't think anyone else will. I don't know how you ladies managed to do it, but you look much shorter in those white coats."

"And your faces don't look as pale in those surgical masks," the hook-handed man agreed. "These are the best disguises Olaf—I mean *Mattathias*—has ever cooked up."

"We don't have time for all this talking," Klaus said, hoping that the associates wouldn't recognize his voice, either. "We've got to get to Room

922 right away.”

“You’re right, of course,” the hook-handed man said. “Follow us.”

The two associates began walking down the hallway of the Surgical Ward as Klaus and Sunny looked at one another in relief.

“Gwit,” Sunny murmured, which meant “They didn’t recognize us either.”

“I know,” Klaus replied in a whisper. “They think we’re the two powder-faced women, disguised as associates of Dr. Flacutono, instead of two children disguised as the two powder-faced women disguised as associates of Dr. Flacutono.”

“Stop all that whispering about disguises,” the bald man said. “If anyone hears you, it’ll be the end of us.”

“Instead of the end of Laura V. Bleediotie,” the hook-handed man said with a sneer. “I’ve been waiting to get hooks on her since she escaped from marrying Mattathias.”

“Trapped,” Sunny said, sneering as best she could.

“Trapped is right,” the bald man said. “I already gave her the anesthetic, so she’s unconscious. All we have to do is lead her to the operating theater, and you can saw her head off.”

“I still don’t understand why we have to murder her in front of all those doctors,” the hook-handed man said.

“So it can look like an accident, you idiot,” the bald man snarled in reply.

“I’m not an idiot,” the hook-handed man said, stopping to glare at his fellow associate. “I’m physically handicapped.”

“Just because you’re physically handicapped doesn’t mean you’re mentally clever,” the bald man said.

“And just because you’re wearing an ugly wig,” the hook-handed man said, “doesn’t mean you can insult me.”

“Stop all this arguing!” Klaus said. “The sooner we can operate on Laura V. Bleediotie, the sooner we’ll all be rich.”

“Yes!” Sunny said.

The two criminals looked down at the Baudelaires, and then nodded at one another sheepishly. “The ladies are right,” the hook-handed man said. “We shouldn’t behave unprofessionally, just because it’s been a very stressful time at work.”

“I know,” the bald man said with a sigh. “It seems like we’ve been following these three orphans forever, only to have them slip out of our grasp at the last minute. Let’s just focus on getting the job done, and work out our personal problems later. Well, here we are.”

The four disguised people had reached the end of a hallway and were standing in front of a door marked “Room 922,” with the name “Laura V. Bleediotie” scrawled on a piece of paper and taped beneath. The bald man took a key out of the pocket in his medical coat, and unlocked the door with a triumphant grin. “Here she is,” he said. “Our little sleeping beauty.”

The door opened with a long, whiny creak, and the children stepped inside the room, which was square and small and had heavy shades over the windows, making it quite dark inside. But even in the dim light the children could see their sister, and they almost gasped at how dreadful she looked.

When the bald associate had mentioned a sleeping beauty, he was referring to a fairy tale that you have probably heard one thousand times. Like all fairy tales, the story of Sleeping Beauty begins with “Once upon a time,” and continues with a foolish young princess who makes a witch very angry, and then takes a nap until her boyfriend wakes her up with a kiss and insists on getting married, at which point the story ends with the phrase “happily ever after.” The story is usually illustrated with fancy drawings of the napping princess, who always looks very glamorous and elegant, with her hair neatly combed and a long silk gown keeping her comfortable as she snores away for years and years. But when Klaus and Sunny saw Violet in Room 922, it looked nothing like a fairy tale.

The eldest Baudelaire was lying on a gurney, which is a metal bed with wheels, used in hospitals to move patients around. This particular gurney was as rusty as the knife Klaus was holding, and its sheets were ripped and soiled. Olaf's associates had put her into a white gown as filthy as the sheets, and had twisted her legs together like vines. Her hair had been messily thrown over her eyes so that no one would recognize her face from *The Daily Punctilio*, and her arms hung loosely from her body, one of them almost touching the floor of the room with one limp finger. Her face was pale, as pale and empty as the surface of the moon, and her mouth was open slightly in a vacant frown, as if she were dreaming of being pricked with a pin. Violet looked like she had dropped onto the gurney from a great height, and if it were not for the slow and steady rise of her chest as she breathed, it would have looked like she had not survived the fall. Klaus and Sunny looked at her in horrified silence, trying not to cry as they gazed at their helpless sister.

"She's a pretty one," the hook-handed man said, "even when she's unconscious."

"She's clever, too," the bald man said, "although her clever little brain won't do her any good when her head has been sawed off."

"Let's hurry up and go to the operating theater," the hook-handed man said, beginning to move the gurney out of the room. "Mattathias said the anesthetic would last for only a little while, so we'd best start the cranioectomy."

"I wouldn't mind if she woke up in the middle of it," the bald man said with a giggle, "but I suppose that would ruin the plan. You ladies take the head end. I don't like to look at her when she's frowning like that."

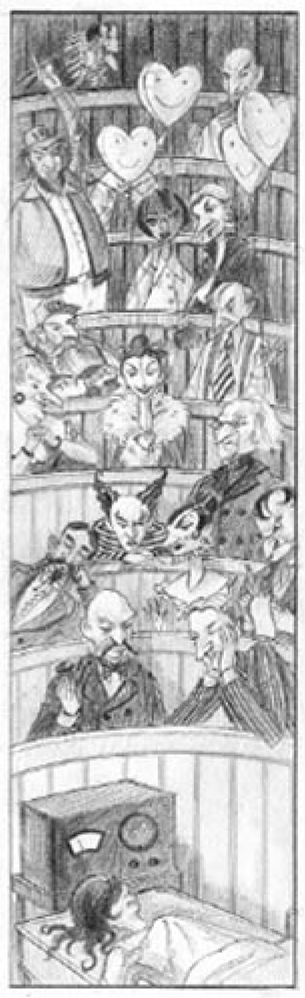
"And don't forget the knife," the hook-handed man said. "Dr. Flacutono and I will be supervising, but you two will actually perform the operation."

The two children nodded, afraid that if they tried to speak, the two henchmen would hear how anxious they were and become suspicious. In silence they took their places at the gurney where their sister lay without moving. The Baudelaires wanted to gently shake her by the shoulders, or whisper in her ear, or even just brush the hair away from her eyes—anything at all to help their unconscious sibling. But the two youngsters knew that any affectionate gesture would give away their disguise, so they just walked alongside the gurney, clutching the rusty knife, as the two men led the way out of Room 922 and through the halls of the Surgical Ward. With every step, Klaus and Sunny watched their sister carefully, hoping for a sign that the anesthesia was wearing off, but Violet's face remained as still and blank as the sheet of paper on which I am printing this story.

Although her siblings preferred to think about her inventing abilities and conversational skills rather than her physical apperance, it was true, as the hook-handed man had said, that Violet was a pretty one, and if her hair had been neatly combed, instead of all tangled up, and she had been dressed in something elegant and glamorous, instead of a stained gown, she might indeed have looked like an illustration from "Sleeping Beauty." But the two younger Baudelaires did not feel like characters in a fairy tale. The unfortunate events in their lives had not begun with "Once upon a time," but with the terrible fire that had destroyed their home, and as Olaf's associates led them to a square metal door at the end of the hallway, Klaus and Sunny feared that their lives would not end like a fairy tale either. The label on the door read "Operating Theater," and as the hook-handed man opened it with one curved glove, the two children could not imagine that their story would end with "happily ever after."

CHAPTER
Eleven

Operating theaters are not nearly as popular as dramatic theaters, musical theaters, and movie theaters, and it is easy to see why. A dramatic theater is a large, dark room in which actors perform a play, and if you are in the audience, you can enjoy yourself by listening to the dialog and looking at the costumes. A musical theater is a large, dark room in which musicians perform a symphony, and if you are in the audience, you can enjoy yourself by listening to the melodies and watching the conductor wave his little stick around. And a movie theater is a large, dark room in which a projectionist shows a film, and if you are in the audience, you can enjoy yourself by eating popcorn and gossiping about movie stars. But an operating theater is a large, dark room in which doctors perform medical procedures, and if you are in the audience, the best thing to do is to leave at once, because there is never anything on display in an operating theater but pain, suffering, and discomfort, and for this reason most operating theaters have been closed down or have been turned into restaurants.



I’m sorry to say, however, that the operating theater at Heimlich Hospital was still quite popular at the time this story takes place. As Klaus and Sunny followed Olaf’s two disguised associates through the square metal door, they saw that the large, dark room was filled with people. There were rows of doctors in white coats who were clearly eager to see a new operation being performed. There were clusters of nurses sitting together and whispering with excitement about the world’s first cranioectomy. There was a large group of Volunteers Fighting Disease who seemed ready to burst into song if needed. And there were a great many people who looked like they had simply walked over to the operating theater to see what was playing. The four disguised people wheeled the gurney onto a small bare stage, lit by a chandelier that was hanging from the ceiling, and as soon as the light of the chandelier fell on Klaus and Sunny’s unconscious sister, all of the audience members burst into cheers and applause. The roar from the crowd only made Klaus and Sunny even more anxious, but Olaf's two associates stopped moving the gurney, raised their arms, and bowed several times.

"Thank you very much!" the hook-handed man cried. "Doctors, nurses, Volunteers Fighting Disease, reporters from *The Daily Punctilio*, distinguished guests, and regular people, welcome to the operating theater at Heimlich Hospital. I am Dr. O. Lucafont, and I will be your medical host for today's performance."

"Hooray for Dr. Lucafont!" a doctor cried, as the crowd burst into applause again, and the hook-handed man raised his rubber-gloved hands and took another bow.

"And I am Dr. Flacutono," the bald man announced, looking a bit jealous of all the applause the hook-handed man was getting. "I am the surgeon who invented the cranioectomy, and I am thrilled to operate today in front of all you wonderful and attractive people."

"Hooray for Dr. Flacutono!" a nurse shouted, and the crowd applauded again. Some of the reporters even whistled as the bald man bowed deeply, using one hand to hold his curly wig on his head.

"The surgeon is right!" the hook-handed man said. "You are wonderful and attractive, all of you! Go on, give yourselves a big hand!"

"Hooray for us!" a volunteer cried, and the audience applauded another time. The two Baudelaires looked at their older sister, hoping that the noise of the crowd would wake her up, but Violet did not move.

"Now, the two lovely ladies you see are two associates of mine named Dr. Tocuna and Nurse Flo," the bald man continued. "Why don't you give them the same wonderful welcome you gave us?"

Klaus and Sunny half expected someone in the crowd to shout, "They aren't medical associates! They're those two children wanted for murder!" but instead the crowd merely cheered once more, and the two children found themselves waving miserably at the members of the audience.

Although the youngsters were relieved that they hadn't been recognized, the butterflies in their stomachs only got worse as everyone in the operating theater grew more and more eager for the operation to begin.

"And now that you've met all of our fantastic performers," the hook-handed man said, "let the show begin. Dr. Flacutono, are you ready to begin?"

"I sure am," the bald man said. "Now, ladies and gentlemen, as I'm sure you know, a cranioectomy is a procedure in which the patient's head is removed. Scientists have discovered that many health problems are rooted in the brain, so that the best thing to do with a sick patient is remove it. However, a cranioectomy is as dangerous as it is necessary. There is a chance that Laura V. Bleediotie might die while the operation is being performed, but sometimes one must risk accidents in order to cure illness."

"A patient's death would certainly be a terrible accident, Dr. Flacutono," the hook-handed man said.

"It sure would, Dr. O. Lucafont," the bald man agreed. "That's why I'm going to have my associates perform the surgery, while I supervise. Dr. Tocuna and Nurse Flo, you may begin."

The crowd applauded once more, and Olaf's associates bowed and blew kisses to each corner of the operating theater as the two children looked at one another in horror.

"What can we do?" Klaus murmured to his sister, looking out at the crowd. "We're surrounded by people who expect us to saw Violet's head off."

Sunny looked at Violet, still unconscious on the gurney, and then at her brother, who was holding the long, rusty knife Esmé had given him. "Stall," she said. The word "stall" has two meanings, but as with most words with two meanings, you can figure out which meaning is being used by looking at the situation. The word "stall," for example, can refer to a place where horses are kept, but Klaus knew at once that Sunny meant something more along the lines of "We'll try to postpone the operation as long as we can, Klaus," and he nodded silently in agreement. The middle Baudelaire took a deep breath and closed his eyes, trying to think of something that could help him postpone the cranioectomy, and all at once he thought of something he had read.

When you read as many books as Klaus Baudelaire, you are going to learn a great deal of information that might not become useful for a long time. You might read a book that would teach you all about the exploration of outer space, even if you do not become an astronaut until you are eighty years old. You might read a book about how to perform tricks on ice skates, and then not be forced to perform these tricks for a few weeks. You might read a book on how to have a successful marriage, when the only woman you will ever love has married someone else and then perished one terrible afternoon. But although Klaus had read books on outer-space exploration, ice-skating tricks, and good marriage methods, and not yet found much use for this information, he had learned a great deal of information that was about to become very useful indeed.

"Before I make the first incision," Klaus said, using a fancy word for "cut" in order to sound more like a medical professional, "I think Nurse Flo and I should talk a little bit about the equipment we're using."

Sunny looked at her brother quizzically. "Knife?" she asked.

"That's right," Klaus said. "It's a knife, and—"

"We all know it's a knife, Dr. Tocuna," the hook-handed man said, smiling at the audience, as the bald man leaned in to whisper to Klaus.

"What are you doing?" he hissed. "Just saw off the brat's head and we'll be done."

"A real doctor would never perform a new operation without explaining everything," Klaus whispered back. "We have to keep talking, or we'll never fool them."

Olaf's associates looked at Klaus and Sunny for a moment, and the two Baudelaires got ready to run, dragging Violet's gurney with them, if they were recognized at last. But after a moment's hesitation, the two disguised men looked at each other and nodded.

"I suppose you're right," the hook-handed man said, and then turned to the audience. "Sorry for the delay, folks. As you know, we're real doctors, so that's why we're explaining everything. Carry on, Dr. Tocuna."

"The cranioectomy will be performed with a knife," Klaus said, "which is the oldest surgical tool in the world." He was remembering the section on knives in *A Complete History of Surgical Tools*, which he had read when he was eleven. "Early knives have been found in Egyptian tombs and Mayan temples, where they were used for ceremonial purposes, and mostly fashioned out of stone. Gradually bronze and iron became the essential materials in knives, although some cultures fashioned them out of the incisors of slain animals."

"Teeth," Sunny explained.

"There are a number of different types of knives," Klaus continued, "including the pocketknife, the penknife, and the drawing knife, but the one required for this cranioectomy is a Bowie knife, named after Colonel James Bowie, who lived in Texas."

"Wasn't that a magnificient explanation, ladies and gentlemen?" the hook-handed man said.

"It sure was," one of the reporters agreed. She was a woman wearing a gray suit and chewing gum as she spoke into a small microphone. "I can see the headline now: 'DOCTOR AND NURSE EXPLAIN HISTORY OF KNIFE.' Wait until the readers of *The Daily Punctilio* see that!"

The audience applauded in agreement, and as the operating theater filled with the sound of cheers and clapping, Violet moved on her gurney, ever so slightly. Her mouth opened a little wider, and one of her limp hands stirred briefly. The motions were so small that only Klaus and Sunny noticed them, and they looked at one another hopefully. Could they keep stalling until the anesthesia completely wore off?

“Enough talk,” the bald man whispered to the children. “It’s lots of fun fooling innocent people, but we’d better get on with the operation before the orphan wakes up.”

“Before I make the first incision,” Klaus said again, continuing to address the audience as if the bald man hadn’t spoken, “I would like to say a few words concerning rust.” He paused for a moment and tried to remember what he had learned from a book entitled *What Happens to Wet Metal*, which he had received as a gift from his mother. “Rust is a reddish-brown coating that forms on certain metals when they oxidize, which is a scientific term for a chemical reaction occurring when iron or steel comes into contact with moisture.” He held up the rusty knife for the audience to see, and out of the corner of his eye, he saw Violet’s hand move again, just barely. “The oxidation process is integral to a cranioectomy due to the oxidative processes of cellular mitochondria and cosmetic demystification,” he continued, trying to use as many complicated words as he could think of.

“Clap!” Sunny cried, and the audience applauded once more, although not as loudly this time.

“Very impressive,” the bald associate said, glaring at Klaus over his surgical mask. “But I think these lovely people will understand the process better once the head has actually been removed.”

“Of course,” Klaus replied. “But first, we need to tenderize the vertebrae, so we can make a clean cut. Nurse Flo, will you please nibble on Viol—I mean, on Laura V. Bleediotie’s neck?”

“Yes,” Sunny said with a smile, knowing just what Klaus was up to. Standing on tiptoe, the youngest Baudelaire gave her sister a few small nibbles on the neck, hoping that it would wake Violet up. As Sunny’s teeth scraped against her skin, Violet twitched, and shut her mouth, but nothing more.

“What are you doing?” the hook-handed man demanded in a furious whisper. “Perform the operation at once, or Mattathias will be furious!”

“Isn’t Nurse Flo wonderful?” Klaus asked the audience, but only a few members of the crowd clapped, and there was not a single cheer. The people in the operating theater were clearly eager to see some surgery rather than hear any more explanations.

“I believe you’ve bitten her neck enough,” the bald man said. His voice was friendly and professional, but his eyes were gazing at the children suspiciously. “Let’s get on with the cranioectomy.”

Klaus nodded, and clasped the knife in both hands, holding it up over his helpless sister. He looked at Violet’s sleeping figure and wondered if he could made a very small cut on Violet’s neck, one that could wake her up but wouldn’t injure her. He looked at the rusty blade, which was shaking up and down as his hands trembled in fear. And then he looked at Sunny, who had stopped nibbling on Violet’s neck and was looking up at him with wide, wide eyes.

“I can’t do it,” he whispered, and looked up at the ceiling. High above them was a square intercom speaker that he had not noticed before, and the sight of the speaker made him think of something. “I can’t do it,” he announced, and there was a gasp from the crowd.

The hook-handed man took a step toward the gurney, and pointed his limp, curved glove at Klaus. The middle Baudelaire could see the sharp tip of his hook, poking through the finger of the glove like a sea creature emerging from the water. “Why not?” the hook-handed man asked quietly.

Klaus swallowed, hoping he still sounded like a medical professional instead of a scared child. “Before I make the first incision, there’s one more thing that has to be done—the most important thing we do here at Heimlich Hospital.”

“And what is that?” the bald man asked. His surgical mask curled down as he gave the children a sinister frown, but Sunny’s mask began to curl in the opposite direction as she realized what Klaus was talking about, and began to smile.

“Paperwork!” she said, and to the Baudelaires’ delight, the audience began to applaud once more.

“Hooray!” called a member of V.F.D. from the back of the operating theater, as the cheering continued. “Hooray for paperwork!”

Olaf’s two associates looked at one another in frustration as the Baudelaires looked at one another in relief. “Hooray for paperwork indeed!” Klaus cried. “We can’t operate on a patient until her file is absolutely complete!”

“I can’t believe we forgot about it, even for a moment!” a nurse cried. “Paperwork is the most important thing we do at this hospital!”

“I can see the headline now,” said the reporter who had spoken earlier. “‘HEIMLICH HOSPITAL ALMOST FORGETS PAPERWORK!’ Wait until the readers of *The Daily Punctilio* see that!”

“Somebody call Hal,” suggested a doctor. “He’s in charge of the Library of Records, so he can solve this paperwork problem.”

“I’ll call Hal right now!” announced a nurse, walking out of the operating theater, and the crowd clapped in support of her decision.

“There’s no need to call Hal,” said the hook-handed man, holding up his hooked gloves to try to calm the crowd. “The paperwork has been taken care of, I promise you.”

“But all surgical paperwork has to be verified by Hal,” Klaus said. “That’s the policy of Heimlich Hospital.”

The bald man glared down at the children and spoke to them in a frightening whisper. “What in the world are you doing?” he asked them. “You’re going to ruin everything!”

“I think Dr. Tocuna is right,” another doctor said. “That’s the policy here.”

The crowd applauded again, and Klaus and Sunny looked at one another. The two Baudelaires, of course, had no idea what the hospital's policy was concerning surgical paperwork, but they were beginning to see that the crowd would believe just about anything if they thought it was being said by a medical professional.

"Hal is on his way," the nurse announced, reentering the room. "There's apparently been some problem at the Library of Records, but he'll come as quickly as he can and settle this matter once and for all."

"We don't need Hal to settle this matter once and for all," a voice said from the far end of the theater, and the Baudelaires turned to see the slender, tottering figure of Esmé Squalor, walking straight toward them in her stiletto-heeled shoes, with two people trailing dutifully behind her. These two people were both dressed in medical coats and surgical masks just like the Baudelaires'. Klaus and Sunny could see just a bit of their pale faces above the masks and knew at once that they were the two powder-faced assistants of Olaf.

"This is the *real* Dr. Tocuna," Esmé said, pointing to one of the women, "and *this* is the real Nurse Flo. The two people up on this stage are impostors."

"No we're not," the hook-handed man said angrily.

"Not you two," Esmé said impatiently, glaring over her surgical mask at the two henchmen. "I mean the other two people on the stage. They fooled everyone. They fooled doctors, nurses, volunteers, reporters, and even me—until I found the real associates of Dr. Flacutono, that is."

"In my medical opinion," Klaus said, "I believe this woman has lost her mind."

"I haven't lost my mind," Esmé said with a snarl, "but you're about to lose your heads, Baudelaires."

"Baudelaires?" the reporter from *The Daily Punctilio* asked. "The same Baudelaires who murdered Count Omar?"

“Olaf,” the bald man corrected.

“I’m confused,” whined a volunteer. “There are too many people pretending to be other people.”

“Allow me to explain,” Esmé said, stepping up on the stage. “I am a medical professional, just like Dr. Flacutono, Dr. O. Lucafont, Dr. Tocuna, and Nurse Flo. You can see that from our medical coats and surgical masks.”

“Us, too!” Sunny cried.

Esmé’s surgical mask curled up in a wicked smile. “Not for long,” she said, and in one swift gesture she ripped the masks off the Baudelaires’ faces. The crowd gasped as the masks fluttered to the ground, and the two children saw the doctors, nurses, reporters, and regular people in the crowd look at them in horror. Only the Volunteers Fighting Disease, who believed that no news was good news, did not recognize the youngsters.

“They *are* the Baudelaires!” a nurse exclaimed in astonishment. “I read about them in *The Daily Punctilio*!”

“Me, too!” cried a doctor.

“It’s always a pleasure to hear from our readers,” the reporter said modestly.

“But there were supposed to be *three* murderous orphans, not two!” another doctor said. “Where’s the oldest one?”

The hook-handed man hurriedly stepped in front of the gurney, shielding Violet from view. “She’s already in jail,” he said quickly.

“She is not!” Klaus said, and brushed Violet’s hair out of her eyes so that everyone could see she was not Laura V. Bleediotie. “These terrible people disguised her as a patient, so they could cut her head off!”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Esmé said. “*You’re* the one who was trying to cut her head off. Look, you’re still holding the knife.”

“That’s true!” the reporter cried. “I can see the headline now: ‘MURDERER ATTEMPTS TO MURDER MURDERER.’ Wait until the readers of *The Daily Punctilio* see this!”

“Tweem!” Sunny shrieked.

“We’re not murderers!” Klaus translated frantically.

“If you’re not murderers,” the reporter said, holding out her microphone, “then why have you sneaked into a hospital in disguise?”

“I think I can explain that,” said another familiar voice, and everyone turned to see Hal enter the operating theater. In one hand he was clutching the ring of keys the Baudelaires had made from paper clips and Violet’s hair ribbon, and with the other hand he was pointing angrily at the children.

“Those three Baudelaire murderers,” he said, “pretended to be volunteers in order to come to work in the Library of Records.”

“They did?” a nurse said, as the audience gasped. “You mean they’re murderers *and* phony volunteers?”

“No wonder they didn’t know the words to the song!” a volunteer cried.

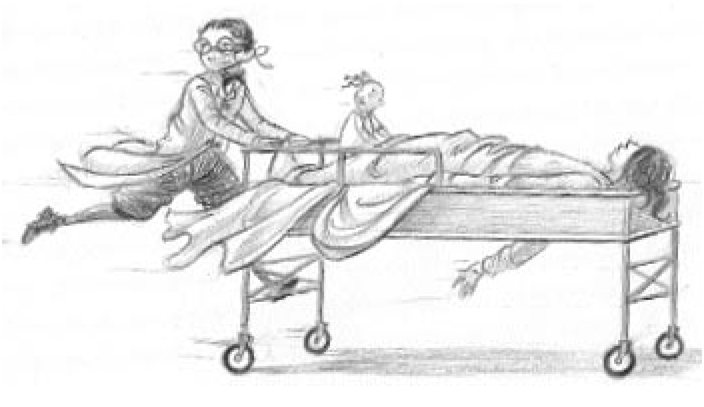
“Taking advantage of my poor eyesight,” Hal continued, pointing at his glasses, “they made these fake keys and switched it with the real one, so they could sneak into the library and destroy the files about their crimes!”

“We didn’t want to destroy the file,” Klaus said, “we wanted to clear our names. I’m sorry we tricked you, Hal, and I’m sorry that some of the file cabinets were knocked over, but—”

“Knocked over?” Hal repeated. “You did more than knock over cabinets.” He looked at the children and sighed wearily, and then turned to face the audience. “These children committed arson,” he said. “The Library of Records is burning as we speak.”

CHAPTER
Twelve

I am alone this evening, and I am alone because of a cruel twist of fate, a phrase which here means that nothing has happened the way I thought it would. Once I was a content man, with a comfortable home, a successful career, a person I loved very much, and an extremely reliable typewriter, but all of those things have been taken away from me, and now the only trace I have of those happy days is the tattoo on my left ankle. As I sit in this very tiny room, printing these words with this very large pencil, I feel as if my whole life has been nothing but a dismal play, presented just for someone else's amusement, and that the playwright who invented my cruel twist of fate is somewhere far above me, laughing and laughing at his creation.



It is not pleasant to feel this way, and it is doubly unpleasant if the cruel twist of fate happens to you when you are actually standing on a stage and there is actually someone, far above you, laughing and laughing, as it was with the Baudelaire children in the operating theater of Heimlich Hospital. The children had scarcely heard Hal's accusation that they had burned down the Library of Records when they heard rough and familiar laughter coming out of the intercom speaker above them. The siblings had heard this laughter when Mattathias had first captured the Quagmire triplets, and when he had trapped the Baudelaires in a locked Deluxe Cell. It was the triumphant laughter of someone who has cooked up a fiendish plot and succeeded, although it always sounded like the laughter of someone who has just told an excellent joke. Because he was laughing over the scratchy intercom, Mattathias sounded as if he had a piece of aluminum foil over his mouth, but the laughter was still loud enough to help wear off the anesthesia, and Violet murmured something and moved her arms.

"Oops," Mattathias said, interrupting his laughter as he realized the intercom was on. "This is Mattathias, the Head of Human Resources, with an important announcement. There is a terrible fire in Heimlich Hospital. The fire was set in the Library of Records by the Baudelaire murderers, and has spread to the Sore Throat Ward, the Stubbed Toe Ward, and the Accidentally Swallowed Something You Shouldn't Have Ward. The orphans are still at large, so do everything you can to find them. After the murdering arsonists have been captured, you might want to rescue some of the patients who are trapped in the fire. That is all."

"I can see the headline now," the reporter said. "'BAUDELAIRE MURDERERS TORCH PAPERWORK.' Wait until the readers of *The Daily Punctilio* see this!"

"Somebody tell Mattathias we've captured the children," a nurse cried in triumph. "You three brats are in big trouble. You're murderers, arsonists, and spurious doctors."

"That's not true," Klaus said, but as he looked around he feared that no one would believe him. He looked at the spurious key ring in Hal's hands, that he and his siblings had used to sneak into the Library of Records. He looked at his medical coat, which he had used to disguise himself as a doctor. And he looked at the rusty blade in his own hands, which he had just been holding over his sister. Klaus remembered when he and his sisters were living with Uncle Monty, and brought several objects to Mr. Poe as evidence of Olaf's treacherous plot. Because of these small objects, Olaf was placed under arrest, and now Klaus was afraid that the same thing would happen to the Baudelaires.

"Surround them!" the hook-handed man called, pointing at the children with one curved glove. "But be careful. The bookworm still has the knife!" Olaf's associates spread out in a circle and slowly began walking toward the youngsters at all angles. Sunny whimpered in fright, and Klaus picked her up and put her on the gurney.

"Arrest the Baudelaires!" a doctor cried.

"That's what we're doing, you fool!" Esmé replied impatiently, but when she turned her head to the Baudelaires they saw her wink above her surgical mask.

"We're going to capture only one of you," she said, in a quiet voice so the audience wouldn't hear her. With two long fingernailed hands she reached down to her stiletto heels. "This in footwear isn't just useful for making me look glamorous and feminine," she said, removing the shoes and pointing them at the children. "These stilettos are perfect for slitting children's throats. Two bratty little Baudelaires will be killed while trying to escape from justice, leaving one bratty little Baudelaire to give us the fortune."

"You'll never get your hands on our fortune," Klaus said, "or your shoes on our throats."

"We'll see," Esmé said, and swung her left shoe at Klaus as if it were a sword. Klaus ducked quickly and felt the *whoosh!* of air as the blade swept over him.

"She's trying to kill us!" Klaus shouted to the audience. "Can't you see? These are the real murderers!"

"No one will ever believe you," Esmé said in a sinister whisper, and swung her right shoe at Sunny, who moved away just in time.

“I don’t believe you!” shouted Hal. “My eyesight might not be what it used to be, but I can see your phony medical coat.”

“I don’t believe you, either!” a nurse cried. “I can see that rusty knife!”

Esmé swung both shoes at the same time, but they collided in midair instead of hitting the children. “Why don’t you surrender?” she hissed. “We’ve finally trapped you, just as you trapped Olaf all those other times.”

“Now you know what it feels like to be a villain,” the bald man chuckled. “Move closer, everyone! Mattathias told me that whoever grabs them first gets to choose where to go for dinner tonight!”

“Is that so?” the hook-handed man asked. “Well, I’m in the mood for pizza.” He swung a rubber-gloved hook at Klaus, who fell back against the gurney, rolling it out of the evil man’s reach.

“I feel more like Chinese food,” one of the powder-faced women said. “Let’s go to that place where we celebrated the Quagmire kidnapping.”

“I want to go to Café Salmonella,” Esmé snarled, disentangling her shoes.

Klaus pushed against the gurney again, wheeling it in the other direction as the circle of associates closed in. He held the rusty knife up for protection, but the middle Baudelaire did not think he could use a weapon, even on people as wicked as these. If Count Olaf had been trapped, he would not have hesitated to swing the rusty blade at the people who were surrounding him, but despite what the bald man had said, Klaus did not feel like a villain. He felt like someone who needed to escape, and as he pushed against the gurney again, he knew how he was going to do it.

“Get back!” Klaus cried. “This knife is very sharp!”

“You can’t kill all of us,” the hook-handed man replied. “In fact, I doubt you have the courage to kill anyone.”

“It doesn’t take courage to kill someone,” Klaus said. “It takes a severe lack of moral stamina.”

At the mention of the phrase “severe lack of moral stamina,” which here means “cruel selfishness combined with a love of violence,” Olaf’s associates laughed in delight. “Your fancy words won’t save you now, you twerp,” Esmé said.

“That’s true,” Klaus admitted. “What will save me now is a bed on wheels used to transport hospital patients.”

Without another word, Klaus tossed the rusty knife to the floor, startling Olaf’s associates into stepping back. The circle of people with a severe lack of moral stamina was spread out a little more, just for a moment, but a moment was all the Baudelaires needed. Klaus jumped onto the gurney, which began to roll quickly toward the square metal door they had come in. A cry rose from the audience as the Baudelaires sped past Olaf’s associates.

“Get them!” the hook-handed man cried. “They’re getting away!”

“They won’t get away from me!” Hal promised, and grabbed the gurney just before it reached the door. The gurney slowed to a halt, and for a second Sunny found herself face-to-face with the old man. Butterflies fluttered in the youngest Baudelaire’s stomach as he glared at her from behind his tiny glasses. Unlike Olaf’s associates, Hal was not an evil person, of course. He was merely someone who loved the Library of Records and was trying to capture the people he believed had set it on fire, and it pained Sunny to see that he thought she was an evil criminal, instead of an unlucky infant. But she knew she did not have time to explain to Hal what had really happened. She scarcely had time to say a single word, and yet that is precisely what the youngest Baudelaire did.

“Sorry,” Sunny said to Hal, and gave him a small smile. Then she opened her mouth a little wider, and bit Hal’s hand as gently as she could, so that he would let go of the gurney without getting hurt.

“Ow!” Hal said, and let go. “The baby bit me!” he shouted to the crowd.

“Are you hurt?” a nurse asked.

“No,” Hal replied, “but I let go of the gurney. They’re rolling out the door!”

The Baudelaires rolled out the door, with Violet’s eyes flickering open, Klaus steering the gurney, and Sunny hanging on for dear life. The children rolled down the hallways of the Surgical Ward, dodging around surprised doctors and other medical professionals.

“Attention!” announced Mattathias’s voice over the intercom. “This is Mattathias, the Head of Human Resources! The Baudelaire murderers and arsonists are escaping on a gurney! Capture them at once! Also, the fire is spreading throughout the hospital! You might want to evacuate!”

“Noriz!” Sunny shouted.

“I’m going as fast as I can!” Klaus cried, dangling his legs over the side of the gurney to scoot it along. “Violet, wake up, please! You can help push!”

“I’m try…ing….” Violet muttered, squinting around her. The anesthesia made everything seem faint and foggy, and it was almost impossible for her to speak, let alone move.

“Door!” Sunny shrieked, pointing to the door that led out of the Surgical Ward. Klaus steered the gurney in that direction and rode past Olaf’s fat associate who looked like neither a man nor a woman, who was still dressed as a spurious guard. With a terrible roar, it began to give chase, walking in huge, lumbering steps, as the Baudelaires raced toward a small group of Volunteers Fighting Disease. The bearded volunteer, who was playing some very familiar chords on his guitar, looked up to see the gurney wheel past them.

“Those must be those murderers Mattathias was talking about!” he said. “Come on, everyone, let’s help that guard capture them!”

"Sounds good to me," another volunteer agreed. "I'm a bit tired of singing that song, if you want to know the truth."

Klaus steered the gurney around a corner, as the volunteers joined the overweight associate in pursuit. "Wake up," he begged Violet, who was looking around her in a confused way. "Please, Violet!"

"Stairs!" Sunny said, pointing to a staircase. Klaus turned the gurney in the direction his sister indicated, and the children began to roll down the stairs, bouncing up and down with each step. It was a fast, slippery ride that reminded the children of sliding down the bannisters at 667 Dark Avenue, or colliding with Mr. Poe's automobile when they were living with Uncle Monty. At a curve in the staircase, Klaus scraped his shoes against the floor to stop the gurney, and then leaned over to look at one of the hospital's confusing maps.

"I'm trying to figure out if we should go through that door," he said, pointing at a door marked "Ward for People with Nasty Rashes," "or continue down the staircase."

"Dleen!" Sunny cried, which meant "We can't continue down the staircase—look!"

Klaus looked, and even Violet managed to focus enough to look down where Sunny was pointing. Down the staircase, just past the next landing, was a flickering, orange glow, as if the sun was rising out of the hospital basement, and a few wisps of dark black smoke were curling up the staircase like the tentacles of some ghostly animal. It was an eerie sight that had haunted the Baudelaires in their dreams, ever since that fateful day at the beach when all their trouble began. For a moment, the three children were unable to do anything but stare down at the orange glow and the tentacles of smoke, and think about all they had lost because of what they were looking at.

"Fire," Violet said faintly.

"Yes," Klaus said. "It's spreading up this staircase. We've got to turn and go back upstairs."

From upstairs, the Baudelaires listened to the associate roar again, and heard the bearded volunteer reply.

“We’ll help you capture them,” he said. “Lead the way, sir—or is it madam? I can’t tell.”

“No up,” Sunny said.

“I know,” Klaus said. “We can’t go up the stairs and we can’t go down. We have to go into the Ward for People with Nasty Rashes.”

Having made this rash decision, Klaus turned the gurney and wheeled it through the door, just as Mattathias’s voice came through on the intercom. “This is Mattathias, the Head of Human Resources,” he said hurriedly. “All associates of Dr. Flacutono, continue to search for the children! Everyone else, gather in front of the hospital—either we will catch the murderers as they escape, or they’ll be burned to a crisp!”

The children rolled into the Ward for People with Nasty Rashes and saw that Mattathias was right. The gurney was racing down a hallway, and the children could see another orange glow at the far end of it. The children heard another roar behind them as the overweight associate lumbered down the stairs. The siblings were trapped in the middle of a hallway that led only to a fiery death or to Olaf’s clutches.

Klaus leaned down and stopped the gurney. “We’d better hide,” he said, jumping to the floor. “It’s too dangerous to be rolling around like this.”

“Where?” Sunny asked, as Klaus helped her down.

“Someplace close by,” Klaus said, grabbing Violet’s arm. “The anesthesia is still wearing off, so Violet can’t walk too far.”

“I’ll…try….” Violet murmured, stepping unsteadily off the gurney and leaning on Klaus. The children looked around and saw that the nearest door was marked “Supply Closet.”

“Glaynop?” Sunny asked.

“I guess so,” Klaus said doubtfully, opening the door with one hand while balancing Violet with the other. “I don’t know what we can do in a supply closet, but at least it’ll hide us for a few moments.”

Klaus and Sunny helped their sister through the door and locked it behind them. Except for a small window in the corner, the closet looked identical to the one where Klaus and Sunny had hidden to decipher the anagram in the patient list. It was a small room, with only one flickering lightbulb hanging from the ceiling, and there were a row of white medical coats hanging from hooks, a rusty sink, huge cans of alphabet soup, and small boxes of rubber bands, but as the two younger Baudelaires looked at these supplies, they did not look like devices for translating anagrams and impersonating medical professionals. Klaus and Sunny looked at all these objects, and then at their older sister. To their relief, Violet’s face was a bit less pale, and her eyes were a bit less confused, which was a very good sign. The eldest Baudelaire needed to be as awake as she could be, because the items in the closet were looking less and less like supplies, and more and more like materials for an invention.

CHAPTER
Thirteen

When Violet Baudelaire was five years old, she won her first invention contest with an automatic rolling pin she'd fashioned out of a broken window shade and six pairs of roller skates. As the judges placed the gold medal around her neck, one of them said to her, "I bet you could invent something with both hands tied behind your back," and Violet smiled proudly. She knew, of course, that the judge did not mean that he was going to tie her up, but merely that she was so skilled at inventing that she could probably build something even with substantial interference, a phrase which here means "something getting in her way."

The eldest Baudelaire had proved the judge right dozens of times, of course, inventing everything from a lockpick to a welding torch with the substantial interference of being in a hurry and not having the right tools. But Violet thought she had never had as much substantial interference as the lingering effects of anesthesia as she squinted at the objects in the supply closet and tried to focus on what her siblings were saying.

“Violet,” Klaus said, “I know that the anesthesia hasn’t completely worn off, but we need you to try to invent something.”

“Yes,” Violet said faintly, rubbing her eyes with her hands. “I…know.”

“We’ll help you all we can,” Klaus said. “Just tell us what to do. The fire is consuming this entire hospital, and we have to get out of here quickly.”

“Rallam,” Sunny added, which meant “And Olaf’s associates are chasing us.”

“Open…the window,” Violet said with difficulty, pointing to the window in the corner.

Klaus helped Violet lean against the wall, so he could step over to the window without letting her fall. He opened the window and looked outside. “It looks like we’re on the third floor,” he said, “or maybe the fourth. There’s smoke in the air, so it’s hard to tell. We’re not so high up, but it’s still too far to jump.”

“Climb?” Sunny asked.

“There’s an intercom speaker right below us,” Klaus said. “I suppose we could hang on to that and climb down to the bushes below, but we’d be climbing in front of a huge crowd. The doctors and nurses are helping the patients escape, and there’s Hal, and that reporter from *The Daily Punctilio* and—”

The middle Baudelaire was interrupted by a faint sound coming from outside the hospital.

“We are Volunteers Fighting Disease,
And we’re cheerful all day long.
If someone said that we were sad,
That person would be wrong.”

“And the Volunteers Fighting Disease,” Klaus continued. “They’re waiting at the entrance to the hospital, just like Mattathias told them to. Can you invent something to fly over them?”

Violet frowned and closed her eyes, standing still for a moment as the volunteers continued singing.

“We visit people who are sick,
And try to make them smile,

Even if their noses bleed,
Or if they cough up bile.”

“Violet?” Klaus asked. “You’re not falling asleep again, are you?”

“No,” Violet said. “I’m…thinking. We need…to distract…the crowd…before we…climb down.”

The children heard a faint roar from beyond the closet door. “Kesalf,” Sunny said, which meant “That’s Olaf’s associate. It sounds like it’s entering the Ward for People with Nasty Rashes. We’d better hurry.”

“Klaus,” Violet said, and opened her eyes. “Open those boxes…of rubber bands. Start to string…them together…to make…a cord.”

“Tra la la, Fiddle dee dee,
Hope you get well soon.
Ho ho ho, hee hee hee,
Have a heart-shaped balloon.”

Klaus looked down and watched the volunteers giving balloons out to the hospital patients who had been evacuated from the hospital. “But how will we distract the crowd?” he asked.

“I…don’t know,” Violet admitted, and looked down at the floor. “I’m having…trouble focusing my…inventing skills.”

“Help,” Sunny said.

“Don’t cry for help, Sunny,” Klaus said. “No one will hear us.”

“Help,” Sunny insisted, and took off her white medical coat. Opening her mouth wide, she bit down on the fabric, ripping a small strip off the coat with her teeth. Then she held up the strip of white cloth, and handed it to Violet.

“Ribbon,” she said, and Violet gave her a weary smile. With unsteady fingers, the eldest Baudelaire tied her hair up to keep it out of her eyes, using the thin strip of fabric instead of a hair ribbon. She closed her eyes again, and then nodded.

“I know…it’s a bit silly,” Violet said. “I think…it did help, Sunny. Klaus…get to work…on the rubber bands. Sunny—can you open…one of those cans of soup?”

“Treen,” Sunny said, which meant “Yes—I opened one earlier, to help decode the anagrams.”

“Good,” Violet replied. With her hair up in a ribbon—even if the ribbon was spurious—her voice sounded stronger and more confident. “We need…an empty can…as quickly as…possible.”

“We visit people who are ill,
And try to make them laugh,
Even when the doctor says
He must saw them in half.

We sing and sing all night and day,
And then we sing some more.
We sing to boys with broken bones
And girls whose throats are sore.”

As the members of V.F.D. continued their cheerful song, the Baudelaires worked quickly. Klaus opened a box of rubber bands and began stringing them together, Sunny began to gnaw at the top of a can of soup, and Violet went to the sink and splashed water on her face to try to make herself as alert as possible. Finally, by the time the volunteers were singing

“Tra la la, Fiddle dee dee,
Hope you get well soon.
Ho ho ho, hee hee hee,
Have a heart-shaped balloon.”

Klaus had a long cord of rubber bands curled at his feet like a snake, Sunny had taken the top off a can of soup and was pouring it down the sink, and Violet was staring anxiously at the bottom of the closet door, from which a very thin wisp of smoke was crawling out.

“The fire is in the hallway,” Violet said, as the children heard another roar from the hallway, “and so is Olaf’s henchperson. We have only a few moments.”

“The cord is all ready,” Klaus said, “but how can we distract the crowd with an empty soup can?”

“It’s not an empty soup can,” Violet said, > “not anymore. Now it’s a spurious intercom. Sunny, poke one hole in the bottom of the can.”

“Pietrisycamollaviadelrechiotemexity,” Sunny said, but she did as Violet asked and poked her sharpest tooth through the bottom of the can.

“Now,” Violet said, “you two hold this near the window. Don’t let the crowd see it. They have to think my voice is coming out of the intercom.”

Klaus and Sunny held the empty soup can near the window, and Violet leaned in and stuck her head inside it, as if it were a mask. The eldest Baudelaire took a deep breath to gather her courage, and then she began to speak. From inside the can her voice sounded scratchy and faint, as if she were talking with a piece of aluminum foil over her mouth, which was precisely how she wanted to sound.

“Attention!” Violet announced, before the volunteers could sing the verse about singing to men with measles. “This is Babs. Mattathias has resigned due to personal problems, so I am once again the Head of Human Resources. The Baudelaire murderers and arsonists have been spotted in the unfinished wing of the hospital. We require everyone’s assistance in making sure they do not escape. Please rush over there right away. That is all.”

Violet pulled her head out of the can, and looked at her siblings. “Do you think it worked?” she asked.

Sunny opened her mouth to answer, but she was interrupted by the voice of the bearded volunteer.

“Did you hear that?” the children heard him say. “The criminals are over in the unfinished half of the hospital. Come on, everyone.”

“Maybe some of us should stay here at the front entrance, just in case,” said a voice the Baudelaires recognized as Hal’s.

Violet stuck her head back into the can. “Attention!” she announced. “This is Babs, the Head of Human Resources. No one should stay at the front entrance to the hospital. It’s too dangerous. Proceed at once to the unfinished wing. That is all.”

“I can see the headline now,” said the reporter from *The Daily Punctilio*. “‘MURDERERS CAPTURED IN UNFINISHED HALF OF HOSPITAL BY WELL-ORGANIZED MEDICAL PROFESSIONALS.’ Wait until the readers of *The Daily Punctilio* see that!”

There was a cheer from the crowd, which faded as they walked away from the front of Heimlich Hospital.

“It worked,” Violet said. “We fooled them. We’re as good at tricking people as Olaf is.”

“And at disguises,” Klaus said.

“Anagrams,” Sunny said.

“And lying to people,” Violet said, thinking of Hal, and the shopkeeper at Last Chance General Store and all the Volunteers Fighting Disease. “Maybe we’re becoming villains after all.”

“Don’t say that,” Klaus said. “We’re not villains. We’re good people. We had to do tricky things in order to save our lives.”

“Olaf has to do tricky things,” Violet said, “to save his life.”

“Different,” Sunny said.

“Maybe it’s not different,” Violet said sadly. “Maybe—”

Violet was interrupted by an angry roar coming from just outside the closet door. Olaf’s overweight assistant had reached the supply closet and was now fumbling at the door with its enormous hands.

“We can discuss this later,” Klaus said. “We have to get out of here right now.”

“We’re not going to climb,” Violet said, “not with such a skinny, rubbery cord. We’re going to bounce.”

“Bounce?” Sunny asked doubtfully.

“Plenty of people bounce from high places on long, rubbery cords just for fun,” Violet said, “so I’m sure we can do it to escape. I’ll tie the cord to the faucet with the Devil’s Tongue knot, and we’ll each take turns jumping out the window. The cord should catch us before we hit the ground, and bounce us up, and down, and up, and down, more and more gently each time. Eventually we’ll get to the bottom safely, and then we’ll toss it back up to the next person.”

“It sounds risky,” Klaus said. “I’m not sure the cord is long enough.”

“It is risky,” Violet agreed, “but not as risky as a fire.”

The associate rattled the door furiously, making a large crack right near the lock. Black smoke began to pour through the crack as if the assistant were pouring ink into the closet, as Violet hurriedly tied the cord to the faucet and then tugged on it to make sure it was secure.

“I’ll go first,” she said. “I invented it, so I’d better test it.”

“No,” Klaus said. “We’re not taking turns.”

“Together,” Sunny agreed.

“If we all go down together,” Violet said, “I’m not sure the cord will hold.”

“We’re not leaving anyone behind,” Klaus said firmly. “Not this time. Either we all escape, or none of us do.”

“But if none of us do,” Violet said tearfully, “then there won’t be any Baudelaires left. Olaf will have won.”

Klaus reached into his pocket and brought out a sheet of paper. He unfolded it, and his sisters could see that it was page thirteen of the Snicket file. He pointed to the photograph of the Baudelaire parents and the sentence that was printed below it. “‘Because of the evidence discussed on page nine,’” he read out loud, “‘experts now suspect that there may in fact be one survivor of the fire, but the survivor’s whereabouts are unknown.’ We’ve got to survive, too—so we can find out what happened, and bring Olaf to justice.”

“But if we take turns,” Violet said frantically, “there’s a better chance that one of us will survive.”

“We’re not leaving anyone behind,” Klaus said firmly. “That’s what makes us different from Olaf.”

Violet thought for a moment, and nodded. “You’re right,” she said.

Olaf’s associate kicked at the door, and the crack grew bigger. The children could see a tiny orange light shining in the hallway and realized that the fire and the associate must have reached the door at the same time.

“I’m scared,” Violet said.

“I’m frightened,” Klaus said.

“Sheer terror,” Sunny said, and the associate kicked the door again, forcing a few sparks through the crack in the door. The Baudelaires looked at one another, and each child grabbed the rubber band cord with one hand. With their other hands they clasped one another, and then, without another word, they leaped out of the window of Heimlich Hospital

STOP.

There are many things in this world I do not know. I do not know how butterflies get out of their cocoons without damaging their wings. I do not know why anyone would boil vegetables when roasting them is tastier. I do not know how to make olive oil, and I do not know why dogs bark before an earthquake, and I do not know why some people voluntarily choose to climb mountains where it is freezing and difficult to breathe, or live in the suburbs, where the coffee is watery and all of the houses look alike. I do not know where the Baudelaire children are now, or if they are safe or if they are even alive. But there are some things I do know, and one of them is that the window of the supply closet in the Ward for People with Nasty Rashes of Heimlich Hospital was not on the third floor or the fourth floor, as Klaus had guessed. The window was on the second floor, so that when the three children dropped through the smoky air, clinging to the rubber band cord for dear life, Violet's invention worked perfectly. Like a yo-yo, the children bounced gently up and down, brushing their feet against one of the bushes planted in front of the hospital, and after a few bounces it was safe to drop to the ground and hug each other with relief.

"We made it," Violet said. "It was a close call, but we survived."

The Baudelaires looked behind them at the hospital, and saw just how close a call it had been. The building looked like a fiery ghost, with great bursts of flame coming from the windows, and oceans of smoke pouring from great gaping holes in the walls. The children could hear glass shattering as the windows burned away, and the crackle of wood as the floors fell through. It occurred to the children that their own house must have looked like this on the day it burned down, and they stepped back from the burning building and huddled together as the air grew thick with ashes and smoke, obscuring the hospital from view.

"Where can we go?" Klaus asked, shouting over the roar of the fire. "Any minute now, the crowd will figure out that we're not in the unfinished half of the hospital, and return here."

“Run!” Sunny shrieked.

“But we can’t even see where we’re going!” Violet cried. “The whole area is filling up with smoke!”

“Stay down!” Klaus said, dropping to the ground and beginning to crawl. “In *The Encyclopedia of Escaping Arson*, the author wrote that there’s more oxygen closer to the ground, so we can breathe more easily. But we need to get to some kind of shelter right away.”

“Where will we find some kind of shelter, in this empty landscape?” Violet asked, crawling behind her brother. “The hospital is the only building for miles, and it’s burning to the ground!”

“I don’t know,” Klaus said, coughing loudly, “but we can’t breathe in this smoke for long!”

“Hurry up!” the Baudelaires heard a voice call out of the smoke. “This way!” A long, black shape emerged from the smoky air, and the children saw it was an automobile, pulling up in front of the hospital. An automobile, of course, is a kind of shelter, but the siblings froze on the ground and dared not crawl an inch farther toward the car.

“Hurry up!” Olaf’s voice said again. “Hurry up or I’ll leave you behind!”

“I’m coming, darling.” From behind them, the Baudelaires heard the reply of Esmé Squalor. “Lucafont and Flacutono are with me, and the ladies are following behind. I had them take all the medical coats we could find, in case we need them for costumes again.”

“Good thinking,” Olaf replied. “Can you see the car in the smoke?”

“Yes,” Esmé said, her voice growing closer. The Baudelaires could hear the odd footsteps of her stiletto-heeled shoes as she strode toward the automobile. “Open the trunk, darling, and we’ll put the costumes in.”

“Oh, all right,” Olaf sighed, and the children saw the tall figure of their enemy step out of the car.

“Wait up, Olaf!” the bald man cried.

“You fool,” Olaf replied. “I told you to call me Mattathias until we leave the hospital grounds. Hurry up and get in the car. The Snicket file wasn’t in the Library of Records, but I think I know where I can find it. Once we destroy those thirteen pages, there’ll be no stopping us.”

“We’ve got to destroy the Baudelaires, too,” Esmé said.

“We would have destroyed them, if all of you hadn’t messed up my plan,” he said, “but never mind that. We have to get out of here before the authorities come.”

“But your largest assistant is still in the Rash Ward, looking for the brats!” the bald man said, and the children heard him open the door of the automobile.

The hook-handed man spoke up, and the children could see his odd shape in the smoke as he got into the car after the bald assistant. “The Ward for People with Nasty Rashes is entirely destroyed,” he said. “I hope the big one got out O.K.”

“We’re not going to wait around to find out if that fool lived or died,” Olaf snarled. “As soon as the ladies can put the costumes in the trunk, we’ll get out of here. It’s been splendid setting this fire, but we’ve got to find the Snicket file as soon as possible, before You-Know-Who does.”

“V.F.D.!” Esmé said with a cackle. “The *real* V.F.D., that is, not those ridiculous singers!”

The trunk opened with a creak, and the children saw the shadow of the trunk’s lid flip open into the smoky air. The lid was peppered with tiny holes—bullet holes, it looked like, undoubtedly from being pursued by the police. Olaf strode back to the car and continued giving orders.

“Get out of the front seat, you idiots,” Olaf said. “My girlfriend sits in front, and the rest of you can pile in the back.”

“Yes, boss,” the bald man replied.

“We have the costumes, Mattathias.” The voice of one of the powder-faced women was faint in the smoke. “Just give us a few seconds to reach the car.”

Violet leaned as close as she could to her siblings so she could whisper to them without being heard. “We’ve got to go in there,” she said.

“Where?” Klaus whispered in reply.

“In the trunk,” Violet replied. “It’s our only chance to get out of here without getting captured—or worse.”

“Culech!” Sunny said in a horrified whisper, which meant something along the lines of “Getting in the trunk is the same thing as getting captured!”

“We’ve got to get the rest of the Snicket file before Olaf does,” Violet said, “or we’ll never be able to clear our names.”

“Or bring Olaf to justice,” Klaus said.

“Ezan,” Sunny said, which meant “Or find out if one of our parents really survived the fire.”

“The only way we can do all those things,” Violet said, “is to get in the trunk of that car.”

Olaf’s voice floated through the smoke, as deceitful and dangerous as the fire itself. “Get in the car this instant!” he ordered his associates. “I’m going to leave at the count of three.”

The Baudelaires gripped each other’s hands so firmly that it hurt to hang on. “Think of everything we have survived together,” Violet whispered. “We’ve lived through countless unfortunate events, only to find ourselves alone. If one of our parents has survived, it'll all be worthwhile. We have to find them if it's the last thing we do."

"One!"

Klaus looked at the gaping trunk, which looked like the mouth of some dark and smoky beast, eager to devour him and his siblings. "You're right," he murmured finally. "We can't stay in this smoky air much longer, or we'll become asphyxiated. The shelter of the trunk is our only hope."

"Yes!" Sunny whispered.

"Two!"

The Baudelaire children stood up and scurried into the trunk of Count Olaf's car. The trunk was damp and smelled terrible, but the children crawled deep into its depths so they wouldn't be seen.

"Wait!" the powder-faced woman called, and the Baudelaires felt the slap of the medical coats being tossed on top of them. "I don't want to be left behind! I can't breathe out here!"

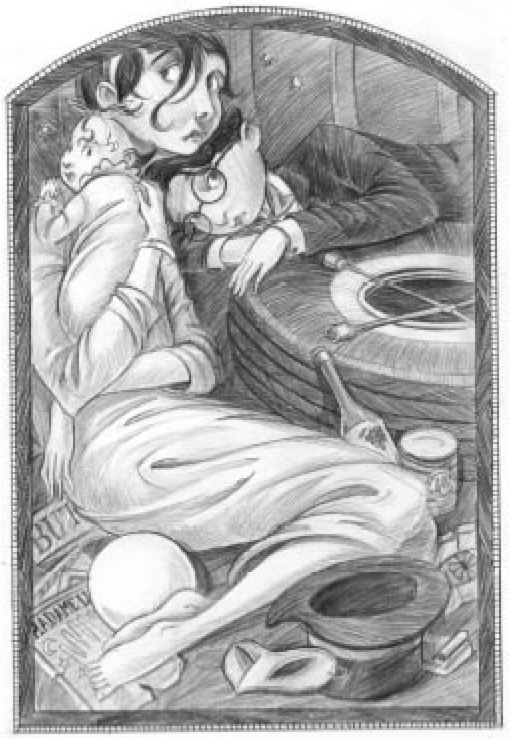
"Will we be able to breathe in here?" Violet asked Klaus as quietly as she could.

"Yes," Klaus said. "Air will come through the bullet holes. This is not the sort of shelter I had in mind, but I guess it might do."

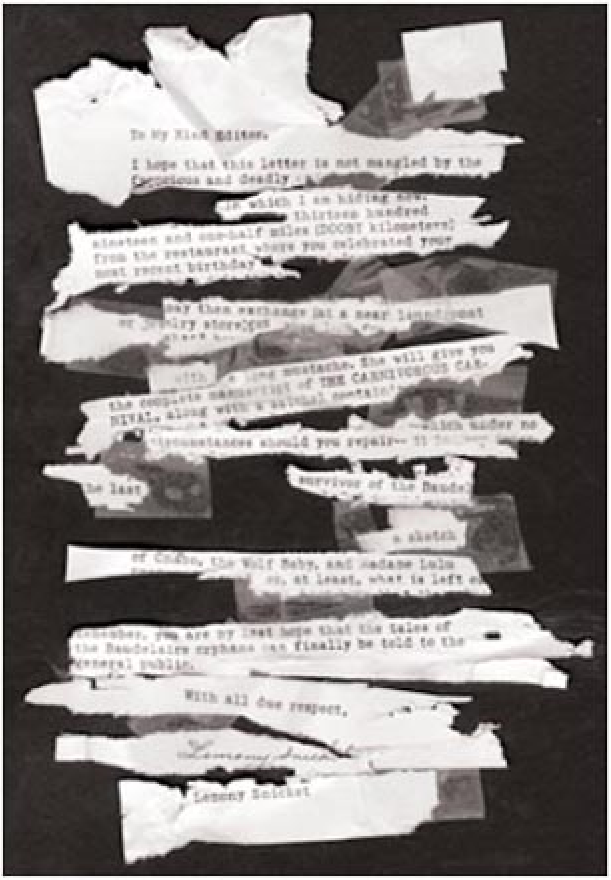
"Golos," Sunny said, which meant "It'll have to do, until something better comes along," and her siblings nodded.

"Three!"

The trunk slammed closed, leaving them in utter darkness, and their shelter rattled and shook as Olaf started the engine and began to drive across the landscape, which was as flat and desolate as ever. But the children could not see outside, of course. In the blackness of the trunk, they could not see anything at all. They could only hear their long, shivering breaths as the air rushed through the bullet holes, and feel their shoulders tremble as they shivered in fear. It was not the sort of shelter the children had in mind, never in their entire lives, but as they huddled together they guessed it might do. For the Baudelaire orphans—if indeed they were still orphans—the shelter of Count Olaf's trunk would have to do, until something better came along.



To My Kind Editor



To My Kind Editor,

I hope that this letter is not mangled by the ferocious and deadly

in which I am hiding now.

thirteen hundred nineteen and one-half miles (DOOBT kilometers) from the restaurant where you celebrated your most recent birthday

pay them exchange at a near laundromat or jewelry store

with a long mustache. She will give you the complete manuscript of THE CARNIVOROUS CARNIVAL, along with a satchel containing

which under no circumstances should you repair

he last

survivor of the Baude

a sketch

of Chabo, the Wolf Baby, and Madame Lulu

or, at least, what is left of

Remember, you are my last hope that the tales of the Baudelaire orphans can finally be told to the general public.

With all due respect,

Lemony Snick

Lemony Snicket

A Series of Unfortunate Events

THE BAD BEGINNING

THE REPTILE ROOM

THE WIDE WINDOW

THE MISERABLE MILL

THE AUSTERE ACADEMY

THE ERSATZ ELEVATOR

THE VILE VILLAGE

THE HOSTILE HOSPITAL

Credits

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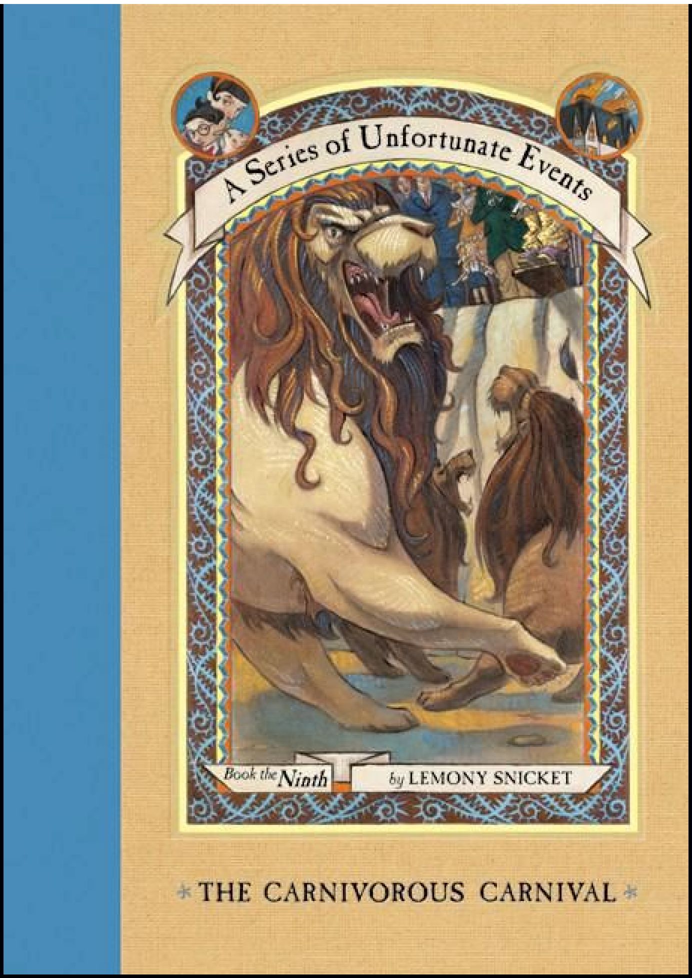
A Series of Unfortunate Events #9: The Carnivorous Carnival


A Series of Unfortunate Events
Book the Ninth
by LEMONY SNICKET
THE CARNIVOROUS CARNIVAL

A Series of Unfortunate Events *BOOK the Ninth*

THE CARNIVOROUS CARNIVAL

by LEMONY SNICKET *Illustrations by* Brett Helquist

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NAME

Dear Reader,

The word “carnivorous,” which appears in the title of this book, means “meat-eating,” and once you have read such a bloodthirsty word, there is no reason to read any further. This carnivorous volume contains such a distressing story that consuming any of its contents would be far more stomach-turning than even the most imbalanced meal.

To avoid causing discomfort, it would be best if I didn’t mention any of the unnerving ingredients of this story, particularly a confusing map, an ambidextrous person, an unruly crowd, a wooden plank, and Chabo the Wolf Baby.

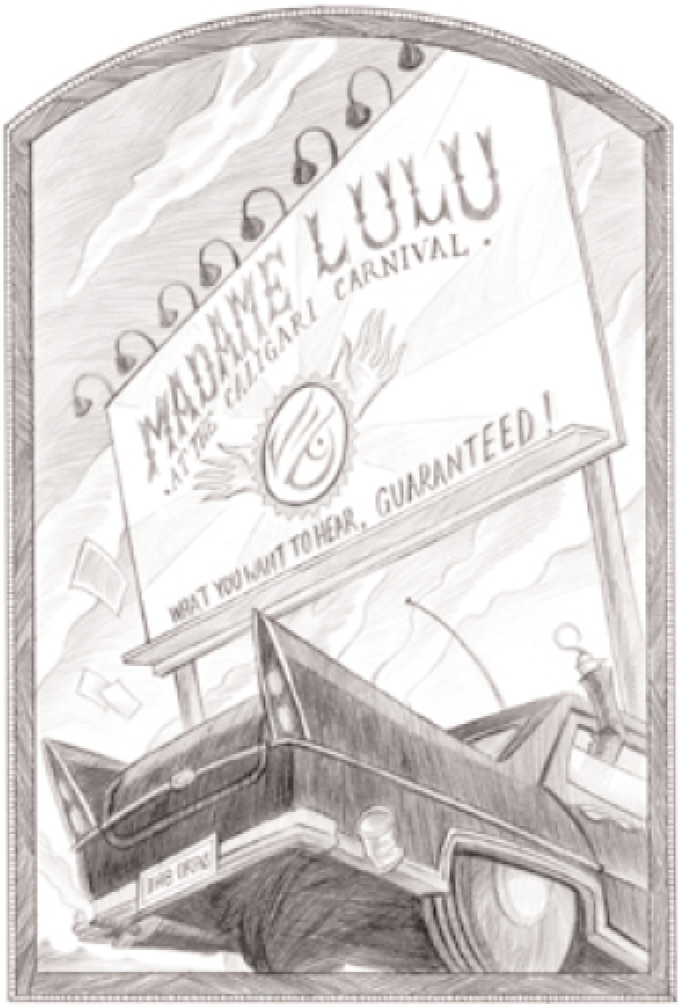
Sadly for me, my time is filled with researching and recording the displeasing and disenchanting lives of the Baudelaire orphans. But your time might be better filled with something more palatable, such as eating your vegetables, or feeding them to someone else.

With all due respect,

Lemony Snicket

Lemony Snicket

For Beatrice—
Our love broke my heart,
and stopped yours.


MADAME LULU
AT THE CALIGARI CARNIVAL
WHAT YOU WANT TO HEAR, GUARANTEED!

CHAPTER
One

When my workday is over, and I have closed my notebook, hidden my pen, and sawed holes in my rented canoe so that it cannot be found, I often like to spend the evening in conversation with my few surviving friends. Sometimes we discuss literature. Sometimes we discuss the people who are trying to destroy us, and if there is any hope of escaping from them. And sometimes we discuss frightening and troublesome animals that might be nearby, and this topic always leads to much disagreement over which part of a frightening and troublesome beast is the most frightening and troublesome. Some say the teeth of the beast, because teeth are used for eating children, and often their parents, and gnawing their bones. Some say the claws of the beast, because claws are used for ripping things to shreds. And some say the hair of the beast, because hair can make allergic people sneeze.

But I always insist that the most frightening part of any beast is its belly, for the simple reason that if you are seeing the belly of the beast it means you have already seen the teeth of the beast and the claws of the beast and even the hair of the beast, and now you are trapped and there is probably no hope for you. For this reason, the phrase “in the belly of the beast” has become an expression which means “inside some terrible place with little chance of escaping safely,” and it is not an expression one should look forward to using.

I’m sorry to tell you that this book will use the expression “the belly of the beast” three times before it is over, not counting all of the times I have already used “the belly of the beast” in order to warn you of all the times “the belly of the beast” will appear. Three times over the course of this story, characters will be inside some terrible place with little chance of escaping safely, and for that reason I would put this book down and escape safely yourself, because this woeful story is so very dark and wretched and damp that the experience of reading it will make you feel as if you are in the belly of the beast, and that time doesn’t count either.

The Baudelaire orphans were in the belly of the beast—that is, in the dark and cramped trunk of a long, black automobile. Unless you are a small, portable object, you probably prefer to sit in a seat when you are traveling by automobile, so you can lean back against the upholstery, look out the window at the scenery going by, and feel safe and secure with a seat belt fastened low and tight across your lap. But the Baudelaires could not lean back, and their bodies were aching from squishing up against one another for several hours. They had no window to look out of, only a few bullet holes in the trunk made from some violent encounter I have not found the courage to research. And they felt anything but safe and secure as they thought about the other passengers in the car, and tried to imagine where they were going.

The driver of the automobile was a man named Count Olaf, a wicked person with one eyebrow instead of two and a greedy desire for money instead of respect for other people. The Baudelaires had first met Count Olaf after receiving the news that their parents had been killed in a terrible fire, and had soon discovered he was only interested in the enormous fortune their mother and father had left behind. With unceasing determination—a phrase which here means “no matter where the three children went”—Count Olaf had pursued them, trying one dastardly technique after another to get his hands on their fortune. So far he had been unsuccessful, although he’d had plenty of help from his girlfriend, Esmé Squalor—an equally wicked, if more fashionable, person who was now sitting beside him in the front seat of the automobile—and an assortment of assistants, including a bald man with an enormous nose, two women who liked to wear white powder all over their faces, and a nasty man who had hooks instead of hands. All of these people were sitting in the back of the automobile, where the children could sometimes hear them speaking over the roar of the engine and the sounds of the road.

One would think, with such a wretched crew as traveling companions, that the Baudelaire siblings would have found some other way to travel rather than sneaking into the trunk, but the three children had been fleeing from circumstances even more frightening and dangerous than Olaf and his assistants and there had been no time to be choosy. But as their journey wore on, Violet, Klaus, and Sunny grew more and more worried about their situation. The sunlight coming in through the bullet holes faded to evening, and the road beneath them turned bumpy and rough, and the Baudelaire orphans tried to imagine where it was they were going and what would happen when they got there.

“Are we there yet?” The voice of the hook-handed man broke a long silence.

“I told you not to ask me that anymore,” replied Olaf with a snarl. “We’ll get there when we get there, and that is that.”

“Could we possibly make a short stop?” asked one of the white-faced women. “I noticed a sign for a rest station in a few miles.”

“We don’t have time to stop anywhere,” Olaf said sharply. “If you needed to use the bathroom, you should have gone before we left.”

“But the hospital was on fire,” the woman whined.

“Yes, let’s stop,” said the bald man. “We haven’t had anything to eat since lunch, and my stomach is grumbling.”

“We can’t stop,” Esmé said. “There are no restaurants out here in the hinterlands that are in.”

Violet, who was the eldest of the Baudelaires, stretched to place her hand on Klaus’s stiff shoulder, and held her baby sister, Sunny, even tighter, as if to communicate with her siblings without speaking. Esmé Squalor was constantly talking about whether or not things were in—a word she liked to use for “stylish”—but the children were more interested in overhearing where the car was taking them. The hinterlands were a vast and empty place very far from the very outskirts of the city, without even a small village for hundreds of miles. Long ago the Baudelaire parents had promised they would bring their children there someday to see the famous hinterlands sunsets. Klaus, who was a voracious reader, had read descriptions of the sunsets that had made the whole family eager to go, and Violet, who had a real talent for inventing things, had even begun building a solar oven so the family could enjoy grilled cheese sandwiches as they watched the dark blue light spread eerily over the hinterlands cacti while the sun slowly sank behind the distant and frosty Mortmain Mountains. Never did the three siblings imagine that they would visit the hinterlands by themselves, stuffed in the trunk of a car of a villain.

“Boss, are you sure it’s safe to be way out here?” asked the hook-handed man. “If the police come looking for us, there’ll be no place to hide.”

“We could always disguise ourselves again,” the bald man said. “Everything we need is in the trunk of the car.

“We don’t need to hide,” Olaf replied, “and we don’t need to disguise ourselves, either. Thanks to that silly reporter at *The Daily Punctilio*, the whole world thinks I’m dead, remember?”

“You’re dead,” Esmé said with a nasty chuckle, “and the three Baudelaire brats are murderers. We don’t need to hide—we need to celebrate!”

“We can’t celebrate yet,” Olaf said. “There are two last things we need to do. First, we need to destroy the last piece of evidence that could send us to jail.”

“The Snicket file,” Esmé said, and the Baudelaires shuddered in the trunk. The three children had found one page of the Snicket file, which was now safe in Klaus’s pocket. It was difficult to tell from only one page, but the Snicket file seemed to contain information about a survivor of a fire, and the Baudelaires were eager to find the remaining pages before Olaf did.

“Yes, of course,” the hook-handed man said. “We have to find the Snicket file. But what’s the second thing?”

“We have to find the Baudelaires, you idiot,” Olaf snarled. “If we don’t find them, then we can’t steal their fortune, and all of my schemes will be a waste.”

“I haven’t found your schemes to be a waste,” said one of the white-faced women. “I’ve enjoyed them very much, even if we haven’t gotten the fortune.”

“Do you think all three of those bratty orphans got out of the hospital alive?” the bald man asked.

“Those children seem to have all the luck in the world,” Count Olaf said, “so they’re all probably alive and well, but it would sure make things easier if one or two of them burned to a crisp. We only need one of them alive to get the fortune.”

“I hope it’s Sunny,” the hook-handed man said. “It was fun putting her in a cage, and I look forward to doing it again.”

“I myself hope it’s Violet,” Olaf said. “She’s the prettiest.”

“I don’t care who it is,” Esmé said. “I just want to know where they are.”

“Well, Madame Lulu will know,” Olaf said. “With her crystal ball, she’ll be able to tell us where the orphans are, where the file is, and anything else we want to know.”

“I never believed in things like crystal balls,” remarked a white-faced woman, “but when this Madame Lulu started telling you how to find the Baudelaires every time they escaped, I learned that fortune-telling is real.”

“Stick with me,” Olaf said, “and you’ll learn lots of new things. Oh, here’s the turn for Rarely Ridden Road. We’re almost there.”

The car lurched to the left, and the Baudelaires lurched with it, rolling to the left-hand side of the trunk, along with the many items Olaf kept in his car to help with his dastardly plots. Violet tried not to cough as one of his fake beards tickled her throat. Klaus held his hand up to his face so that a sliding toolbox wouldn't break his glasses. And Sunny shut her mouth tightly so she wouldn't get one of Olaf's dirty undershirts tangled in her sharp teeth. Rarely Ridden Road was even bumpier than the highway they had been traveling on, and the car made so much noise that the children could not hear any more of the conversation until Olaf pulled the automobile to a creaky stop.

"Are we there yet?" the hook-handed man asked.

"Of course we're here, you fool," Olaf said. "Look, there's the sign—Caligari Carnival."

"Where is Madame Lulu?" asked the bald man.

"Where do you think?" Esmé asked, and everyone laughed. The doors of the automobile opened with a scraping sound, and the car lurched again as everyone piled out.

"Should I get the wine out of the trunk, boss?" the bald man asked.

The Baudelaires froze.

"No," Count Olaf replied. "Madame Lulu will have plenty of refreshments for us."

The three children lay very still and listened as Olaf and his troupe trudged away from the car. Their footsteps grew fainter and fainter until the siblings could hear nothing but the evening breeze as it whistled through the bullet holes, and at last it seemed safe for the Baudelaire orphans to speak to one another.

"What are we going to do?" Violet whispered, pushing the beard away from her.

"Merrill," Sunny said. Like many people her age, the youngest Baudelaire sometimes used language that was difficult for some people to understand, but her siblings knew at once that she meant something like, “We’d better get out of this trunk.”

“As soon as possible,” Klaus agreed. “We don’t know how soon Olaf and his troupe will return. Violet, do you think you can invent something to get us out of here?”

“It shouldn’t be too hard,” Violet said, “with all this stuff in the trunk.” She reached out her hand and felt around until she found the mechanism that was keeping the trunk closed. “I’ve studied this kind of latch before,” she said. “All I need to move it is a loop of strong twine. Feel around and see if we can find something.”

“There’s something wrapped around my left arm,” Klaus said, squirming around. “It feels like it might be part of the turban Olaf wore when he disguised himself as Coach Genghis.”

“That’s too thick,” Violet said. “It needs to slip between two parts of the lock.”

“Semja!” Sunny said.

“That’s my shoelace, Sunny,” Klaus said.

“We’ll save that as a last resort,” Violet said. “We can’t have you tripping all over the place if we’re going to escape. Wait, I think I found something underneath the spare tire.”

“What is it?”

“I don’t know,” Violet said. “It feels like a skinny cord with something round and flat at the end.”

“I bet it’s a monocle,” Klaus said. “You know, that funny eyepiece Olaf wore when he was pretending to be Gunther, the auctioneer.”

“I think you’re right,” Violet said. “Well, this monocle helped Olaf with his scheme, and now it’s going to help us with ours. Sunny, try to move over a bit so I can see if this will work.”

Sunny squirmed over as far as she could, and Violet reached around her siblings and slipped the cord of Olaf's monocle around the lock of the trunk. The three children listened as Violet wiggled her invention around the latch, and after only a few seconds they heard a quiet *click!* and the door of the trunk swung open with a long, slow *creeeak.* As the cool air rushed in, the Baudelaires stayed absolutely still in case the noise of the trunk caught Olaf's attention, but apparently he and his assistants were too far away to hear, because after a few seconds the children could hear nothing but the chirping of the evening crickets and the faint barking of a dog.

The Baudelaires looked at one another, squinting in the dim light, and without another word Violet and Klaus climbed out of the trunk and then lifted their sister out into the night. The famous hinterlands sunset was just ending, and everything the children saw was bathed in dark blue, as if Count Olaf had driven them into the depths of the ocean. There was a large wooden sign with the words CALIGARI CARNIVAL printed in old-fashioned script, along with a faded painting of a lion chasing a frightened little boy. Behind the sign was a small booth advertising tickets for sale, and a phone booth that gleamed in the blue light. Behind these two booths was an enormous roller coaster, a phrase which here means "a series of small carts where people can sit and race up and down steep and frightening hills of tracks, for no discernible reason," but it was clear, even in the fading light, that the roller coaster had not been used for quite some time, because the tracks and carts were overgrown with ivy and other winding plants, which made the carnival attraction look as if it were about to sink into the earth. Past the roller coaster was a row of enormous tents, shivering in the evening breeze like jellyfish, and alongside each tent was a caravan, which is a wheeled carriage used as a home by people who travel frequently. The caravans and tents all had different designs painted on the sides, but the Baudelaires knew at once which caravan was Madame Lulu's because it was decorated with an enormous eye. The eye matched the one tattooed on Count Olaf's left ankle, the one the Baudelaires had seen many times in their lives, and it made them shiver to think they could not escape it even in the hinterlands.

"Now that we're out of the trunk," Klaus said, "let's get out of the area. Olaf and his troupe could get back any minute."

“But where are we going to go?” Violet asked. “We’re in the hinterlands. Olaf’s comrade said there was no place to hide.”

“Well, we’ll have to find one,” Klaus said. “It can’t be safe to hang around any place where Count Olaf is welcome.”

“Eye!” Sunny agreed, pointing to Madame Lulu’s caravan.

“But we can’t go wandering around the countryside again,” Violet said. “The last time we did that, we ended up in even more trouble.”

“Maybe we could call the police from that phone booth,” Klaus said.

“Dragnet!” Sunny said, which meant “But the police think we’re murderers!”

“I suppose we could try to reach Mr. Poe,” Violet said. “He didn’t answer the telegram we sent him asking for help, but maybe we’ll have better luck on the phone.”

The three siblings looked at one another without much hope. Mr. Poe was the Vice President of Orphan Affairs at Mulctuary Money Management, a large bank in the city, and part of his job was overseeing the Baudelaires’ affairs after the fire. Mr. Poe was not a wicked person, but he had mistakenly placed them in the company of so much wickedness that he had been almost as wicked as an actual wicked person, and the children were not particularly eager to contact him again, even if it was all they could think of.

“It’s probably a slim chance that he’ll be of any help,” Violet admitted, “but what have we got to lose?”

“Let’s not think about that,” Klaus replied, and walked over to the phone booth. “Maybe Mr. Poe will at least allow us to explain ourselves.”

“Veriz,” Sunny said, which meant something like, “We’ll need money to make a phone call.”

“I don’t have any,” Klaus said, reaching into his pockets. “Do you have any money, Violet?”

Violet shook her head. “Let’s call the operator and see if there’s some way we can place a call without paying for it.”

Klaus nodded, and opened the door of the booth so he and his sisters could crowd inside. Violet lifted the receiver and dialed O for operator, while Klaus lifted up Sunny so all three siblings could hear the conversation.

“Operator,” said the operator.

“Good evening,” Violet said. “My siblings and I would like to place a call.”

“Please deposit the proper amount of money,” the operator said.

“We don’t have the proper amount of money,” Violet said. “We don’t have any money at all. But this is an emergency.”

There was a faint wheezing noise from the phone, and the Baudelaires realized that the operator was sighing. “What is the exact nature of your emergency?”

Violet looked down at her siblings and saw the last of the sunset’s blue light reflecting off Klaus’s glasses and Sunny’s teeth. As the dark closed around them, the nature of their emergency seemed so enormous that it would take the rest of the night to explain it to the telephone operator, and the eldest Baudelaire tried to figure out how she could summarize, a word which here means “tell their story in a way that would convince the operator to let them talk to Mr. Poe.”

“Well,” she began, “my name is Violet Baudelaire, and I’m here with my brother, Klaus, and my sister, Sunny. Our names might sound a bit familiar to you, because *The Daily Punctilio* has recently published an article saying that we’re Veronica, Klyde, and Susie Baudelaire, and that we’re murderers who killed Count Omar. But Count Omar is really Count

Olaf, and he’s not really dead. He faked his death by killing another person with the same tattoo, and framed us for the murder. Recently he destroyed a hospital while trying to capture us, but we managed to hide in the trunk of his car as he drove off with his comrades. Now we’ve gotten out of the trunk, and we’re trying to reach Mr. Poe so he can help us get ahold of the Snicket file, which we think might explain what the initials V.F.D. stand for, and if one of our parents survived the fire after all. I know it’s a very complicated story, and it may seem unbelievable to you, but we’re all by ourselves in the hinterlands and we don’t know what else to do.”

The story was so terrible that Violet had cried a little while telling it, and she brushed a tear from her eye as she waited for a reply from the operator. But no voice came out of the phone. The three Baudelaires listened carefully, but all they could hear was the empty and distant sound of a telephone line.

“Hello?” Violet said finally.

The telephone said nothing.

“Hello?” Violet said again. “Hello? Hello?”

The telephone did not answer.

“Hello?” Violet said, as loud as she dared.

“I think we’d better hang up,” Klaus said gently.

“But why isn’t anyone answering?” Violet cried.

“I don’t know,” Klaus said, “but I don’t think the operator will help us.”

Violet hung up the phone and opened the door of the booth. Now that the sun was down the air was getting colder, and she shivered in the evening breeze. “Who will help us?” she asked. “Who will take care of us?”

“We’ll have to take care of ourselves,” Klaus said.

“Ephrai,” Sunny said, which meant “But we’re in real trouble now.”

“We sure are,” Violet agreed. “We’re in the middle of nowhere, with no place to hide, and the whole world thinks we’re criminals. How do criminals take care of themselves out in the hinterlands?”

The Baudelaires heard a burst of laughter, as if in reply. The laughter was quite faint, but in the still of the evening it made the children jump. Sunny pointed, and the children could see a light in one of the windows in Madame Lulu’s caravan. Several shadows moved across the window, and the children could tell that Count Olaf and his troupe were inside, chatting and laughing while the Baudelaire orphans shivered outside in the gloom.

“Let’s go see,” Klaus said. “Let’s go find out how criminals take care of themselves.”

CHAPTER
Two

Eavesdropping—a word which here means “listening in on interesting conversations you are not invited to join”—is a valuable thing to do, and it is often an enjoyable thing to do, but it is not a polite thing to do, and like most impolite things, you are bound to get into trouble if you get caught doing it. The Baudelaire orphans, of course, had plenty of experience not getting caught, so the three children knew how to walk as quietly as possible across the grounds of Caligari Carnival, and how to crouch as invisibly as possible outside the window of Madame Lulu’s caravan. If you had been there that eerie blue evening—and nothing in my research indicates that you were—you wouldn’t have heard even the slightest rustle from the Baudelaires as they eavesdropped on their enemies.

Count Olaf and his troupe, however, were making plenty of noise. “Madame Lulu!” Count Olaf was roaring as the children pressed up against the side of the caravan so that they would be hidden in the shadows. “Madame Lulu, pour us some wine! Arson and escaping from the authorities always makes me very thirsty!”

“I’d prefer buttermilk, served in a paper carton,” Esmé said. “That’s the new in beverage.”

"Five glasses of wine and a carton of buttermilk coming up, please," answered a woman in an accent the children recognized. Not so long ago, when Esmé Squalor had been the Baudelaires' caretaker, Olaf had disguised himself as a person who did not speak English well, and as part of his disguise, he had spoken in an accent very similar to the one they were hearing now. The Baudelaires tried to peer through the window and catch a glimpse of the fortune-teller, but Madame Lulu had shut her curtains tightly. "I'm thrilled, please, to see you, my Olaf. Welcome to the caravan of mine. How is life for you?"

"We've been swamped at work," the hook-handed man said, using a phrase which here means "chasing after innocent children for quite some time." "Those three orphans have been very difficult to capture."

"Do not worry of the children, please," Madame Lulu replied. "My crystal ball tells me that my Olaf will prevail."

"If that means 'murder innocent children,'" one of the white-faced women said, "then that's the best news we've heard all day."

"'Prevail' means 'win,'" Olaf said, "but in my case that's the same thing as killing those Baudelaires. Exactly when does the crystal ball say I will prevail, Lulu?"

"Very soon, please," Madame Lulu replied. "What gifts have you brought me from your traveling, my Olaf?"

"Well, let's see," Olaf replied. "There's a lovely pearl necklace I stole from one of the nurses at Heimlich Hospital."

"You promised me *I* could have that," Esmé said. "Give her one of those crow hats you snatched from the Village of Fowl Devotees."

"I tell you, Lulu," Olaf said, "your fortune-telling abilities are amazing. I never would have guessed that the Baudelaires were hiding out in that stupid town, but your crystal ball knew right away."

"Magic is magic, please," Lulu replied. "More wine, my Olaf?"

“Thank you,” Olaf said. “Now, Lulu, we need your fortune-telling abilities once more.”

“The Baudelaire brats slipped away from us again,” the bald man said, “and the boss was hoping you’d be able to tell us where they went.”

“Also,” the hook-handed man said, “we need to know where the Snicket file is.”

“And we need to know if one of the Baudelaire parents survived the fire,” Esmé said. “The orphans seem to think so, but your crystal ball could tell us for sure.”

“And I’d like some more wine,” one of the white-faced women said.

“So many demands you make,” Madame Lulu said in her strange accent. “Madame Lulu remembers, please, when you would visit only for the pleasure of my company, my Olaf.”

“There isn’t time for that tonight,” Olaf replied quickly. “Can’t you consult your crystal ball right now?”

“You know rules of crystal ball, my Olaf,” Lulu replied. “At night the crystal ball must be sleeping in the fortune-telling tent, and at sunrise you may ask one question.”

“Then I’ll ask my first question tomorrow morning,” Olaf said, “and we’ll stay until all my questions are answered.”

“Oh, my Olaf,” Madame Lulu said. “Please, times are very hard for Caligari Carnival. Is not good business idea to have carnival in hinterlands, so there are not many people to see Madame Lulu or crystal ball. Caligari Carnival gift caravan has lousy souvenirs. And Madame Lulu has not enough freaks, please, in the House of Freaks. You visit, my Olaf, with troupe, and stay many days, drink my wine and eat all of my snackings.”

“This roast chicken is very delicious,” the hook-handed man said.

“Madame Lulu has no money, please,” Lulu continued. “Is hard, my Olaf, to do fortune-telling for you when Madame Lulu is so poor. The caravan of mine has leaky roof, and Madame Lulu needs money, please, to do repairs.”

“I’ve told you before,” Olaf said, “once we get the Baudelaire fortune, the carnival will have plenty of money.”

“You said that about Quagmire fortune, my Olaf,” Madame Lulu said, “and about Snicket fortune. But never a penny does Madame Lulu see. We must think, please, of something to make Caligari Carnival more popular. Madame Lulu was hoping that troupe of my Olaf could put on a big show like *The Marvelous Marriage.* Many people would come to see.”

“The boss can’t get up on stage,” the bald man said. “Planning schemes is a full-time job.”

“Besides,” Esmé said, “I’ve retired from show business. All I want to be now is Count Olaf’s girlfriend.”

There was a silence, and the only thing the Baudelaires could hear from Lulu’s caravan was the crunch of someone chewing on chicken bones. Then there was a long sigh, and Lulu spoke very quietly. “You did not tell me, my Olaf, that Esmé was the girlfriend of you. Perhaps Madame Lulu will not let you and troupe stay at the carnival of mine.”

“Now, now, Lulu,” Count Olaf said, and the children shivered as they eavesdropped. Olaf was talking in a tone of voice the Baudelaires had heard many times, when he was trying to fool someone into thinking he was a kind and decent person. Even with the curtains closed, the Baudelaires could tell that he was giving Madame Lulu a toothy grin, and that his eyes were shining brightly beneath his one eyebrow, as if he were about to tell a joke. “Did I ever tell you how I began my career as an actor?”

“It’s a fascinating story,” the hook-handed man said.

“It certainly is,” Olaf agreed. “Give me some more wine, and I’ll tell you. Now then, as a child, I was always the most handsome fellow at school, and one day a young director…"

The Baudelaires had heard enough. The three children had spent enough time with the villain to know that once he began talking about himself, he continued until the cows came home, a phrase which here means "until there was no more wine," and they tiptoed away from Madame Lulu's caravan and back toward Count Olaf's car so they could talk without being overheard. In the dark of night, the long, black automobile looked like an enormous hole, and the children felt as if they were about to fall into it as they tried to decide what to do.

"I guess we should leave," Klaus said uncertainly. "It's definitely not safe around here, but I don't know where we can go in the hinterlands. There's nothing for miles and miles but wilderness, and we could die of thirst, or be attacked by wild animals."

Violet looked around quickly, as if something were about to attack them that very moment, but the only wild animal in view was the painted lion on the carnival sign. "Even if we found someone else out there," she said, "they'd probably think we were murderers and call the police. Also, Madame Lulu promised to answer all of Olaf's questions tomorrow morning."

"You don't think Madame Lulu's crystal ball really works, do you?" Klaus asked. "I've never read any evidence that fortune-telling is real."

"But Madame Lulu keeps telling Count Olaf where we are," Violet pointed out. "She must be getting her information from someplace. If she can really find out the location of the Snicket file, or learn if one of our parents is alive…"

Her voice trailed off, but she did not need to finish her sentence. All three Baudelaires knew that finding out if someone survived the fire was worth the risk of staying nearby.

"Sandover," Sunny said, which meant "So we're staying."

“We should at least stay the night,” Klaus agreed. “But where can we hide? If we don’t stay out of sight, someone is likely to recognize us.”

“Karneez?” Sunny asked.

“The people in those caravans work for Madame Lulu,” Klaus said. “Who knows if they’d help us or not?”

“I have an idea,” Violet said, and walked over to the back of Count Olaf’s car. With a *creeeak,* she opened the trunk again and leaned down inside.

“Nuts!” Sunny said, which meant “I don’t think that’s such a good idea, Violet.”

“Sunny’s right,” Klaus said. “Olaf and his henchmen might come back any minute to unpack the trunk. We can’t hide in there.”

“We’re not going to hide in there,” Violet said. “We’re not going to hide at all. After all, Olaf and his troupe never hide, and they manage not to be recognized. We’re going to disguise ourselves.”

“Gabrowha?” Sunny asked.

“Why wouldn’t it work?” Violet replied. “Olaf wears these disguises and he manages to fool everyone. If we fool Madame Lulu into thinking we’re somebody else, we can stay around and find the answers to our questions.”

“It seems risky,” Klaus said, “but I suppose it’s just as risky as trying to hide someplace. Who should we pretend to be?”

“Let’s look through the disguises,” Violet said, “and see if we get any ideas.”

“We’ll have to feel through them,” Klaus said. “It’s too dark to look through anything.”

The Baudelaires stood in front of the open trunk and reached inside to begin their search. As I'm sure you know, whenever you are examining someone else's belongings, you are bound to learn many interesting things about the person of which you were not previously aware. You might examine some letters your sister received recently, for instance, and learn that she was planning on running away with an archduke. You might examine the suitcases of another passenger on a train you are taking, and learn that he had been secretly photographing you for the past six months. I recently looked in the refrigerator of one of my enemies and learned she was a vegetarian, or at least pretending to be one, or had a vegetarian visiting her for a few days. And as the Baudelaire orphans examined some of the objects in Olaf's trunk, they learned a great deal of unpleasant things. Violet found part of a brass lamp she remembered from living with Uncle Monty, and learned that Olaf had stolen from her poor guardian, in addition to murdering him. Klaus found a large shopping bag from the In Boutique, and learned that Esmé Squalor was just as obsessed with fashionable clothing as she ever was. And Sunny found a pair of pantyhose covered in sawdust, and learned that Olaf had not washed his receptionist disguise since he had used it last. But the most dismaying thing the children learned from searching the trunk of Olaf's car was just how many disguises he had at his disposal. They found the hat Olaf used to disguise himself as a ship captain, and the razor he had probably used to shave his head in order to resemble a lab assistant. They found the expensive running shoes he had worn to disguise himself as a gym teacher, and the plastic ones he had used when he was pretending to be a detective. But the siblings also found plenty of costumes they had never seen before, and it seemed as though Olaf could keep on disguising himself forever, following the Baudelaires to location after location, always appearing with a new identity and never getting caught.

"We could disguise ourselves as almost anybody," Violet said. "Look, here's a wig that makes me look like a clown, and here's one that makes me look like a judge."

"I know," Klaus said, holding up a large box with several drawers. "This appears to be a makeup kit, complete with fake mustaches, fake eyebrows, and even a pair of glass eyes."

“Twicho!” Sunny said, holding up a long white veil.

“No, thank you,” Violet said. “I already had to wear that veil once, when Olaf nearly married me. I’d rather not wear it again. Besides, what would a bride be doing wandering around the hinterlands?”

“Look at this long robe,” Klaus said. “It looks like something a rabbi would wear, but I don’t know if Madame Lulu would believe that a rabbi would visit her in the middle of the night.”

“Ginawn!” Sunny said, using her teeth to wrap a pair of sweatpants around her. The youngest Baudelaire meant something like, “All these clothes are too big for me,” and she was right.

“That’s even bigger than that pinstripe suit Esmé bought you,” Klaus said, helping his sister get disentangled. “No one would believe that a pair of sweatpants was walking around a carnival by itself.”

“All these clothes are too big,” Violet said. “Look at this beige coat. If I tried to disguise myself in it, I’d only look freakish.”

“Freakish!” Klaus said. “That’s it!”

“Whazit?” Sunny asked.

“Madame Lulu said that she didn’t have enough freaks in the House of Freaks. If we find disguises that make us look freakish, and tell Lulu that we’re looking for work, she might hire us as part of the carnival.”

“But what exactly do freaks do?” Violet asked.

“I read a book once about a man named John Merrick,” Klaus said. “He had horrible birth defects that made him look terribly deformed. A carnival put him on display as part of a House of Freaks, and people paid money to go into a tent and look at him.”

“Why would people want to look at someone with birth defects?” Violet asked. “It sounds cruel.”

“It was cruel,” Klaus said. “The crowd often threw things at Mr. Merrick, and called him names. I’m afraid the House of Freaks isn’t a very pleasant form of entertainment.”

“You’d think someone would put a stop to it,” Violet said, “but you’d think somebody would put a stop to Count Olaf, too, and nobody does.”

“Radev,” Sunny said with a nervous look around them. By “Radev,” she meant “Somebody’s going to put a stop to *us* if we don’t disguise ourselves soon,” and her siblings nodded solemnly in agreement.

“Here’s some kind of fancy shirt,” Klaus said. “It’s covered in ruffles and bows. And here’s an enormous pair of pants with fur on the cuffs.”

“Could both of us wear them at once?” Violet asked.

“Both of us?” Klaus said. “I suppose so, if we kept on our clothes underneath, so Olaf’s would fit. We could each stand on one leg, and tuck our other legs inside. We’d have to lean against one another as we walked, but I think it might work.”

“And we could do the same thing with the shirt,” Violet said. “We could each put one arm through a sleeve and keep the other tucked inside.”

“But we couldn’t hide one of our heads,” Klaus pointed out, “and with both of our heads poking out of the top we’d look like some sort of—”

“—two-headed person,” Violet finished, “and a two-headed person is exactly what a House of Freaks would put on display.”

“That’s good thinking,” Klaus said. “People won’t be on the lookout for a two-headed person. But we’ll need to disguise our faces, too.”

“The makeup kit will take care of that,” Violet said. “Mother taught me how to draw fake scars on myself when she appeared in that play about the murderer.”

“And here’s a can of talcum powder,” Klaus said. “We can use this to whiten our hair.”

“Do you think Count Olaf will notice that these things are missing from his trunk?” Violet asked.

“I doubt it,” Klaus said. “The trunk isn’t very well organized, and I don’t think he’s used some of these disguises for a long time. I think we can take enough to become a two-headed person without Olaf missing anything.”

“Beriu?” Sunny said, which meant “What about me?”

“These disguises are made for fully grown people,” Violet said, “but I’m sure we can find you something. Maybe you could fit inside one of these shoes, and be a person with just a head and one foot. That’s plenty freakish.”

“Chelish,” Sunny said, which meant something along the lines of, “I’m too big to fit inside a shoe.”

“That’s true,” Klaus said. “It’s been a while since you were shoe-sized.” He reached inside the trunk and pulled out something short and hairy, as if he had caught a raccoon. “But this might work,” he said. “I think this is the fake beard Olaf wore when he was pretending to be Stephano. It’s a long beard, so it might work as a short disguise.”

“Let’s find out,” Violet said, “and let’s find out quickly.”

The Baudelaires found out quickly. In just a few minutes, the children found out just how easy it was to transform themselves into entirely different people. Violet, Klaus, and Sunny had some experience in disguising themselves, of course—Klaus and Sunny had used medical coats at Heimlich Hospital in a plan to rescue Violet, and even Sunny could remember when all three siblings had occasionally worn costumes for their own amusement, back when they had lived in the Baudelaire mansion with their parents. But this time, the Baudelaire orphans felt more like Count Olaf and his troupe, as they worked quietly and hurriedly in the night to erase all traces of their true identities. Violet felt through the makeup kit until she found several pencils that were normally used to make one’s eyebrows more dramatic, and even though it was simple and painless to draw scars on Klaus’s face, it felt as if she were breaking the promise she made to her parents, a very long time ago, that she would always look after her siblings and keep them away from harm. Klaus helped Sunny wrap herself in Olaf’s fake beard, but when he saw her eyes and the tips of her teeth peeking out of the mass of scratchy hair, it felt as if he had fed his baby sister to some tiny but hungry animal. And as Sunny helped her siblings button themselves into the fancy shirt and sprinkle talcum on their hair to turn it gray, it felt as if they were melting into Olaf’s clothes. The three Baudelaires looked at one another carefully but it was as if there were no Baudelaires there at all, just two strangers, one with two heads and the other with a head that was covered in fur, all alone in the hinterlands.

“I think we look utterly unrecognizable,” Klaus said, turning with difficulty to face his older sister. “Maybe it’s because I took off my glasses, but to me we don’t look a thing like ourselves.”

“Will you be able to see without your glasses?” Violet asked.

“If I squint,” Klaus said, squinting. “I can’t read like this, but I won’t be bumping into things. If I keep them on, Count Olaf will probably recognize me.”

“Then you’d better keep them off,” Violet said, “and I’ll stop wearing a ribbon in my hair.”

“We’d better disguise our voices, too,” Klaus said. “I’ll try to speak as high as I can, and why don’t you try to speak in a low voice, Violet?”

“Good idea,” Violet said, in as low a voice as she could. “And Sunny, you should probably just growl.”

“Grr,” Sunny tried.

“You sound like a wolf,” Violet said, still practicing her disguised tone. “Let’s tell Madame Lulu that you’re half wolf and half person.”

“That would be a miserable experience,” Klaus said, in the highest voice he could manage. “But I suppose being born with two heads wouldn’t be any easier."

"We'll explain to Lulu that we've had miserable experiences, but now we're hoping things will get better working at the carnival," Violet said, and then sighed. "That's one thing we don't have to pretend. We *have* had miserable experiences, and we *are* hoping that things will get better here. We're almost as freakish as we're pretending to be."

"Don't say that," Klaus said, and then remembered his new voice. "Don't say that," he said again, at a much higher pitch. "We're not freaks. We're still the Baudelaires, even if we're wearing Olaf's disguises."

"I know," Violet said, in her new voice, "but it's a little confusing pretending to be a completely different person."

"Grr," Sunny growled in agreement, and the three children put the rest of Count Olaf's things back in the trunk, and walked in silence to Madame Lulu's caravan. It was awkward for Violet and Klaus to walk in the same pair of pants, and Sunny had to keep stopping to brush the beard out of her eyes. It *was* confusing pretending to be completely different people, particularly because it had been so long since the Baudelaires were able to be the people they really were. Violet, Klaus, and Sunny did not think of themselves as the sort of children who hid in the trunks of automobiles, or who wore disguises, or who tried to get jobs at the House of Freaks. But the siblings could scarcely remember when they had been able to relax and do the things they liked to do best. It seemed ages since Violet had been able to sit around and think of inventions, instead of frantically building something to get them out of trouble. Klaus could barely remember the last book he had read for his own enjoyment, instead of as research to defeat one of Olaf's schemes. And Sunny had used her teeth many, many times to escape from difficult situations, but it had been quite a while since she had bitten something recreationally. As the youngsters approached the caravan, it seemed as if each awkward step took them further and further from their real lives as Baudelaires, and into their disguised lives as carnival freaks, and it was indeed very confusing. When Sunny knocked on the door, Madame Lulu called out, "Who's there?" and for the first time in their lives, it was a confusing question.

“We’re freaks,” Violet answered, in her disguised voice. “We’re three—I mean, we’re two freaks looking for work.”

The door opened with a creak, and the children got their first look at Madame Lulu. She was wearing a long, shimmering robe that seemed to change colors as she moved, and a turban that looked very much like the one Count Olaf had worn back at Prufrock Preparatory School. She had dark, piercing eyes, with two dramatic eyebrows hovering suspiciously as she looked them over. Behind her, sitting at a small round table, were Count Olaf, Esmé Squalor, and Olaf’s comrades, who were all staring at the youngsters curiously. And as if all those curious eyes weren’t enough, there was one more eye gazing at the Baudelaires—a glass eye, attached to a chain around Madame Lulu’s neck. The eye matched the one painted on her caravan, and the one tattooed on Count Olaf’s ankle. It was an eye that seemed to follow the Baudelaires wherever they went, drawing them deeper and deeper into the troubling mystery of their lives.

“Walk in, please,” Madame Lulu said in her strange accent, and the disguised children obeyed. As freakishly as they could, the Baudelaire orphans walked in, taking a few steps closer to all those staring eyes, and a few steps further from the lives they were leaving behind.

CHAPTER

Three

WELCOME TO THE
HOUSE of FREAKS

Besides getting several paper cuts in the same day or receiving the news that someone in your family has betrayed you to your enemies, one of the most unpleasant experiences in life is a job interview. It is very nerve-wracking to explain to someone all the things you can do in the hopes that they will pay you to do them. I once had a very difficult job interview in which I had not only to explain that I could hit an olive with a bow and arrow, memorize up to three pages of poetry, and determine if there was poison mixed into cheese fondue without tasting it, but I had to demonstrate all these things as well. In most cases, the best strategy for a job interview is to be fairly honest, because the worst thing that can happen is that you won’t get the job and will spend the rest of your life foraging for food in the wilderness and seeking shelter underneath a tree or the awning of a bowling alley that has gone out of business, but in the case of the Baudelaire orphans’ job interview with Madame Lulu, the situation was much more desperate. They could not be honest at all, because they were disguised as entirely different people, and the worst thing that could happen was being discovered by Count Olaf and his troupe and spending the rest of their lives in circumstances so terrible that the children could not bear to think of them.

“Sit down, please, and Lulu will interview you for carnival job,” Madame Lulu said, gesturing to the round table where Olaf and his troupe were sitting. Violet and Klaus sat down on one chair with difficulty, and Sunny crawled onto another while everyone watched them in silence. The troupe had their elbows on the table and were eating the snacks Lulu had provided with their fingers, while Esmé Squalor sipped her buttermilk, and Count Olaf leaned back in his chair and looked at the Baudelaires very, very carefully.

"It seems to me you look very familiar," he said.

"Perhaps you have seen before the freaks, my Olaf," Lulu said. "What are names of the freaks?"

"My name is Beverly," Violet said, in her low, disguised voice, inventing a name as quickly as she could invent an ironing board. "And this is my other head, Elliot."

Olaf reached across the table to shake hands, and Violet and Klaus had to stop for a moment to figure out whose arm was sticking out of the right-hand sleeve. "It's very nice to meet you both," he said. "It must be very difficult, having two heads."

"Oh, yes," Klaus said, in as high a voice as he could manage. "You can't imagine how troublesome it is to find clothing."

"I was just noticing your shirt," Esmé said. "It's very in."

"Just because we're freaks," Violet said, "doesn't mean we don't care about fashion."

"How about eating?" Count Olaf said, his eyes shining brightly. "Do you have trouble eating?"

"Well, I—I mean, well, we—" Klaus said, but before he could go on, Olaf grabbed a long ear of corn from a platter on the table and held it toward the two children.

"Let's see how much trouble you have," he snarled, as his henchmen began to giggle. "Eat this ear of corn, you two-headed freak."

“Yes,” Madame Lulu agreed. “It is best way to see if you can work in carnival. Eat corn! Eat corn!”

Violet and Klaus looked at one another, and then reached out one hand each to take the corn from Olaf and hold it awkwardly in front of their mouths. Violet leaned forward to take the first bite, but the motion of the corn made it slip from Klaus’s hand and fall back down onto the table, and the room roared with cruel laughter.

“Look at them!” one of the white-faced women laughed. “They can’t even eat an ear of corn! How freakish!”

“Try again,” Olaf said with a nasty smile. “Pick the corn up from the table, freak.”

The children picked up the corn and held it to their mouths once more. Klaus squinted and tried to take a bite, but when Violet tried to move the corn to help him, it hit him in the face and everyone—except for Sunny, of course—laughed once more.

“You are funny freaks,” Madame Lulu said. She was laughing so hard that she had to wipe her eyes, and when she did, one of her dramatic eyebrows smeared slightly, as if she had a small bruise above one eye. “Try again, Beverly-and-Elliot freak!”

“This is the funniest thing I’ve ever seen,” said the hook-handed man. “I always thought people with birth defects were unfortunate, but now I realize they’re hilarious.”

Violet and Klaus wanted to point out that a man with hooks for hands would probably have an equally difficult time eating an ear of corn, but they knew that a job interview is rarely a good time to start arguments, so the siblings swallowed their words and began swallowing corn. After a few bites, the children began to get their bearings, a phrase which here means “figure out how two people, using only two hands, can eat one ear of corn at the same time,” but it was still quite a difficult task. The ear of corn was greasy with butter that left damp streaks on their mouths or dripped down their chins. Sometimes the ear of corn would be at a perfect angle for one of them to bite, but would be poking the other one in the face. And often the ear of corn would simply slip out of their hands, and everyone would laugh yet again.

“This is more fun than kidnapping!” said the bald associate of Olaf’s, who was shaking with laughter. “Lulu, this freak will have people coming from miles around to watch, and all it will cost you is an ear of corn!”

“Is true, please,” Madame Lulu agreed, and looked down at Violet and Klaus. “The crowd loves sloppy eating,” she said. “You are hired for House of Freaks show.”

“How about that other one?” Esmé asked, giggling and wiping buttermilk from her upper lip. “What is that freak, some sort of living scarf?”

“Chabo!” Sunny said to her siblings. She meant something like, “I know this is humiliating, but at least our disguises are working!” but Violet was quick to disguise her translation.

“This is Chabo the Wolf Baby,” she said, in her low voice. “Her mother was a hunter who fell in love with a handsome wolf, and this is their poor child.”

“I didn’t even know that was possible,” said the hook-handed man.

“Grr,” Sunny growled.

“It might be funny to watch her eat corn, too,” said the bald man, and he grabbed another ear of corn and waved it at the youngest Baudelaire. “Here Chabo! Have an ear of corn!”

Sunny opened her mouth wide, but when the bald man saw the tips of her teeth poking out through the beard, he yanked his hand back in fear.

“Yikes!” he said. “That freak is vicious!”

“She’s still a bit wild,” Klaus said, still speaking as high as he could. “In fact, we got all these horrible scars from teasing her.”

"Grr," Sunny growled again, and bit a piece of silverware to demonstrate how wild she was.

"Chabo will be excellent carnival attraction," Madame Lulu pronounced. "People are always liking of violence, please. You are hired, too, Chabo."

"Just keep her away from me," Esmé said. "A wolf baby like that would probably ruin my outfit."

"Grr!" Sunny growled.

"Come now, freaky people," Madame Lulu said. "Madame Lulu will show you the caravan, please, where you will do the sleeping."

"We'll stay here and have more wine," Count Olaf said. "Congratulations on the new freaks, Lulu. I knew you'd have good luck with me around."

"Everyone does," Esmé said, and kissed Olaf on the cheek. Madame Lulu scowled, and led the children out of her caravan and into the night.

"Follow me, freaks, please," she said. "You will be living, please, in freaks' caravan. You will share with other freaks. There is Hugo, Colette, and Kevin, all freaks. Every day will be House of Freaks show. Beverly and Elliot, you will be eating of corn, please. Chabo, you will be attacking of audience, please. Are there any freaky questions?"

"Will we be paid?" Klaus asked. He was thinking that having some money might help the Baudelaires, if they learned the answers to their questions and had an opportunity to get away from the carnival.

"No, no, no," Madame Lulu said. "Madame Lulu will be giving no money to the freaks, please. If you are freak, you are lucky that someone will give you work. Look at man with hooks on hands. He is grateful to do the working for Count Olaf, even though Olaf will not be giving him of the Baudelaire fortune."

"Count Olaf?" Violet asked, pretending that her worst enemy was a complete stranger. "Is that the gentleman with one eyebrow?"

"That is Olaf," Lulu said. "He is brilliant man, but do not be saying the wrong things to him, please. Madame Lulu always says you must always give people what they want, so always tell Olaf he is brilliant man."

"We'll remember that," Klaus said.

"Good, please," Madame Lulu said. "Now, here is freak caravan. Welcome freaks, to your new home."

The fortune-teller had stopped at a caravan with the word FREAKS painted on it in large, sloppy letters. The letters were smeared and dripping in several places, as if the paint was still wet, but the word was so faded that the Baudelaires knew the caravan had been labeled many years ago. Next to the caravan was a shabby tent with several holes in it and a sign reading WELCOME TO THE HOUSE OF FREAKS, with a small drawing of a girl with three eyes. Madame Lulu strode past the sign to knock on the caravan's wooden door.

"Freaks!" Madame Lulu cried. "Please wake up, please! New freaks are here for you to say hello!"

"Just a minute, Madame Lulu," called a voice from behind the door.

"No just a minute, please," Madame Lulu said. "Now! I am the boss of the carnival!"

The door swung open to reveal a sleepy-looking man with a hunchback, a word which here means "a back with a hump near the shoulder, giving the person a somewhat irregular appearance." He was wearing a pair of pajamas that were ripped at the shoulder to make room for his hunchback, and holding a small candle to help him see in the dark. "I know you are the boss, Madame Lulu," the man said, "but it's the middle of the night. Don't you want your freaks to be well-rested?"

“Madame Lulu does not particularly care about sleep of freaks,” Lulu said haughtily. “Please be telling the new freaks what to do for show tomorrow. The freak with two heads will be eating corn, please, and the little wolf freak will be attacking audience.”

“Violence and sloppy eating,” the man said, and sighed. “I guess the crowd will like that.”

“Of course crowd will like,” Lulu said, “and then carnival will get much money.”

“And then maybe you’ll pay us?” the man asked.

“Fat chance, please,” Madame Lulu replied. “Good night, freaks.”

“Good night, Madame Lulu,” replied Violet, who would have rather been called a proper name, even if it was one she invented, than simply “freak,” but the fortune-teller walked away without looking back. The Baudelaires stood in the doorway of the caravan for a moment, watching Lulu disappear into the night, before looking up at the man and introducing themselves a bit more properly.

“My name is Beverly,” Violet said. “My second head is named Elliot, and this is Chabo the Wolf Baby.”

“Grr!” growled Sunny.

“I’m Hugo,” the man said. “It’ll be nice to have new coworkers. Come on inside the caravan and I’ll introduce you to the others.”

Still finding it awkward to walk, Violet and Klaus followed Hugo inside, and Sunny followed her siblings, preferring to crawl rather than walk, because it made her seem more half wolf. The caravan was small, but the children could see by the light of Hugo’s candle that it was tidy and clean. There was a small wooden table in the center, with a set of dominoes stacked up in the center and several chairs grouped around. In one corner was a rack with clothing hung on it, including a long row of identical coats, and a large mirror so you could comb your hair and make sure you looked presentable. There was a small stove for cooking meals, with a few pots and pans stacked alongside it, and a few potted plants lined up near the window so they would get enough sunlight. Violet would have liked to add a small workbench she could use while inventing things, Klaus would have been pleased to be squinting at some bookshelves, and Sunny would have preferred to see a stack of raw carrots or other foods that are pleasant to bite, but otherwise the caravan looked like a cozy place to live. The only thing that seemed to be missing was someplace to sleep, but as Hugo walked farther into the room, the children saw that there were three hammocks, which are long, wide pieces of cloth used for beds, hanging from places on the walls. One hammock was empty—the Baudelaires supposed that this was where Hugo slept—but in another they could see a tall skinny woman with curly hair squinting down at them, and in the third was a man with a very wrinkled face who was still asleep.

“Kevin!” Hugo called up to the sleeping man. “Kevin, get up! We have new coworkers, and I’ll need help setting up more hammocks.”

The man frowned and glared down at Hugo. “I wish you hadn’t woken me up,” Kevin said. “I was having a delightful dream that there was nothing wrong with me at all, instead of being a freak.”

The Baudelaires took a good look at Kevin as he lowered himself to the floor and were unable to see anything the least bit freakish about him, but he stared at the Baudelaires as if he had seen a ghost. “My word,” he said. “You two have it as bad as I do.”

“Try to be polite, Kevin,” Hugo said. “This is Beverly and Elliot, and there on the floor is Chabo the Wolf Baby.”

“Wolf Baby?” Kevin repeated, shaking Violet and Klaus’s shared right hand. “Is she dangerous?”

“She doesn’t like to be teased,” Violet said.

“I don’t like to be teased either,” Kevin said, and hung his head. “But wherever I go, I hear people whispering, ‘there goes Kevin, the ambidextrous freak.’”

“Ambidextrous?” Klaus said. “Doesn’t that mean you are both right-handed and left-handed?”

“So you’ve heard of me,” Kevin said. “Is that why you traveled out here to the hinterlands, so you could stare at somebody who can write his name with either his left hand or his right?”

“No,” Klaus said. “I just know the word ‘ambidextrous’ from a book I read.”

“I had a feeling you’d be smart,” Hugo said. “After all, you have twice as many brains as most people.”

“I only have one brain,” Kevin said sadly. “One brain, two ambidextrous arms, and two ambidextrous legs. What a freak!”

“It’s better than being a hunchback,” Hugo said. “Your hands may be freaky, but you have absolutely normal shoulders.”

“What good are normal shoulders,” Kevin said, “when they’re attached to hands that are equally good at using a knife and fork?”

“Oh, Kevin,” the woman said, and climbed down from her hammock to give him a pat on the head. “I know it’s depressing being so freakish, but try and look on the bright side. At least you’re better off than me.” She turned to the children and gave them a shy smile. “My name is Colette,” she said, “and if you’re going to laugh at me, I’d prefer you do it now and get it over with.”

The Baudelaires looked at Colette and then at one another. “Renuf!” Sunny said, which meant something like, “I don’t see anything freakish about you either, but even if I did I wouldn’t laugh at you because it wouldn’t be polite.”

“I bet that’s some sort of wolf laugh,” Colette said, “but I don’t blame Chabo for laughing at a contortionist.”

“Contortionist?” Violet asked.

“Yes,” Colette sighed. “I can bend my body into all sorts of unusual positions. Look.”

The Baudelaires watched as Colette sighed again and launched into a contortionist routine. First she bent down so her head was between her legs, and curled up into a tiny ball on the floor. Then she pushed one hand against the ground and lifted her entire body up on just a few fingers, braiding her legs together into a spiral. Finally she flipped up in the air, balanced for a moment on her head, and twisted her arms and legs together like a mass of twine before looking up at the Baudelaires with a sad frown.

“You see?” Colette said. “I’m a complete freak.”

“Wow!” Sunny shrieked.

“I thought that was amazing,” Violet said, “and so did Chabo.”

“That’s very polite of you to say so,” Colette said, “but I’m ashamed that I’m a contortionist.”

“But if you’re ashamed of it,” Klaus said, “why don’t you just move your body normally, instead of doing contortions?”

“Because I’m in the House of Freaks, Elliot,” Colette said. “Nobody would pay to see me move my body normally.”

“It’s an interesting dilemma,” Hugo said, using a fancy word for “problem” that the Baudelaires had learned from a law book in Justice Strauss’s library. “All three of us would rather be normal people than freaks, but tomorrow morning, people will be waiting in the tent for Colette to twist her body into strange positions, for Beverly and Elliot to eat corn, for Chabo to growl and attack the crowd, for Kevin to write his name with both hands, and for me to try on one of those coats. Madame Lulu says we must always give people what they want, and they want freaks performing on a stage. Come now, it’s very late at night. Kevin, give me a helping hand putting up hammocks for the newcomers, and then let’s all try to get some sleep.”

“I might as well give you *two* helping hands,” Kevin said glumly. “They’re both equally efficient. Oh, I wish that I was either right-handed or left-handed.”

“Try to cheer up,” Colette said gently. “Maybe a miracle will happen tomorrow, and we’ll all get the things we wish for most.”

No one in the caravan said anything more, but as Hugo and Kevin prepared two hammocks for the three Baudelaires, the children thought about what Colette had said. Miracles are like meatballs, because nobody can exactly agree what they are made of, where they come from, or how often they should appear. Some people say that a sunrise is a miracle, because it is somewhat mysterious and often very beautiful, but other people say it is simply a fact of life, because it happens every day and far too early in the morning. Some people say that a telephone is a miracle, because it sometimes seems wondrous that you can talk with somebody who is thousands of miles away, and other people say it is simply a manufactured device fashioned out of metal parts, electronic circuitry, and wires that are very easily cut. And some people say that sneaking out of a hotel is a miracle, particularly if the lobby is swarming with policemen, and other people say it is simply a fact of life, because it happens every day and far too early in the morning. So you might think that there are so many miracles in the world that you can scarcely count them, or that there are so few that they’re scarcely worth mentioning, depending on whether you spend your mornings gazing at a beautiful sunset or lowering yourself into a back alley with a rope fashioned out of matching towels.

But there was one miracle the Baudelaires were thinking about as they lay in their hammocks and tried to sleep, and this was the sort of miracle that felt bigger than any meatball the world has ever seen. The hammocks creaked in the caravan as Violet and Klaus tried to get comfortable in one set of clothing and Sunny tried to arrange Olaf’s beard so that it wouldn’t be too scratchy, and all three youngsters thought about a miracle so wondrous and beautiful that it made their hearts ache to think of it. The miracle, of course, was that one of their parents was alive after all, that either their father or their mother had somehow survived the fire that had destroyed their home and begun the children’s unfortunate journey. To have one more

Baudelaire alive was such an enormous and unlikely miracle that the children were almost afraid to wish for it, but they wished for it anyway. The youngsters thought of what Colette had said—that maybe a miracle would happen, and that they would all get the thing they wished for most—and waited for morning to come, when Madame Lulu's crystal ball might bring the miracle the Baudelaires were wishing for.

At last the sun rose, as it does every day, and very early in the morning. The three children had slept very little and wished very much, and now they watched the caravan slowly fill with light, and listened to Hugo, Colette, and Kevin shift in their hammocks, and wondered if Count Olaf had entered the fortune-teller's tent yet, and if he had learned anything there. And just when they could stand it no more, they heard the sound of hurrying footsteps and a loud, metallic knock on the door.

"Wake up! Wake up!" came the voice of the hook-handed man, but before I write down what he said I must tell you that there is one more similarity between a miracle and a meatball, and it is that they both might appear to be one thing but turn out to be another. It happened to me once at a cafeteria, when it turned out there was a small camera hidden in the lunch I received. And it happened to Violet, Klaus, and Sunny now, although it was quite some time before they learned that what the hook-handed man said turned out to be something different from what they thought when they heard him outside the door of the freaks' caravan.

"Wake up!" the hook-handed man said again, and pounded on the door. "Wake up and hurry up! I'm in a very bad mood and have no time for your nonsense. It's a very busy day at the carnival. Madame Lulu and Count Olaf are running errands, I'm in charge of the House of Freaks, the crystal ball revealed that one of those blasted Baudelaire parents is still alive, and the gift caravan is almost out of figurines."

CHAPTER
Four

"What?" asked Hugo, yawning and rubbing his eyes. "What did you say?"

"I said the gift caravan is almost out of figurines," the hook-handed man said from behind the door. "But that's not your concern. People are already arriving at the carnival, so you freaks need to be ready in fifteen minutes."

"Wait a moment, sir!" Violet thought to use her low, disguised voice just in time, as she and her brother climbed down from their hammock, still sharing a single pair of pants. Sunny was already on the floor, too astonished to remember to growl. "Did you say that one of the Baudelaire parents is alive?"

The door of the caravan opened a crack, and the children could see the face of the hook-handed man peering at them suspiciously.

"What do you care, freaks?" he asked.

"Well," Klaus said, thinking quickly, "we've been reading about the Baudelaires in *The Daily Punctilio.* We're very interested in the case of those three murderous children."

“Well,” the hook-handed man said, “those kids’ parents were supposed to be dead, but Madame Lulu looked into her crystal ball and saw that one of them was alive. It’s a long story, but it means that we’re all going to be very busy. Count Olaf and Madame Lulu had to leave early this morning to run an important errand, so I’m now in charge of the House of Freaks. That means I get to boss you around, so hurry up and get ready for the show!”

“Grr!” Sunny growled.

“Chabo’s all set to perform,” Violet said, “and the rest of us will be ready soon.”

“You’d better be,” the hook-handed man said, and began to shut the door before stopping for a moment. “That’s funny,” he said. “It looks like one of your scars is blurry.”

“They blur as they heal,” Klaus said.

“Too bad,” the hook-handed man said. “It makes you look less freakish.” He slammed the door and the siblings could hear him walk away from the caravan.

“I feel sorry for that man,” Colette remarked, as she swung down from her hammock and curled into a contortion on the floor. “Every time he and that Count person come to visit, it makes me feel bad to look at his hooks.”

“He’s better off than me,” Kevin said, yawning and stretching his ambidextrous arms. “At least one of his hooks is stronger than the other one. My arms and legs are exactly alike.”

“And mine are very bendable,” Colette said. “Well, we’d better do as the man says and get ready for the show.”

“That’s right,” Hugo agreed, reaching into a shelf next to his hammock and pulling out a toothbrush. “Madame Lulu says that we must always give people what they want, and that man wants us ready right away.”

"Here, Chabo," Violet said, looking down at her sister. "I'll help you sharpen your teeth."

"Grr!" Sunny agreed, and the two older Baudelaires leaned down together, and lifted Sunny up and moved into a corner so the three children could whisper to one another near the mirror, while Hugo, Colette, and Kevin performed their toilette, a phrase which here means "did the things necessary to begin their day as carnival freaks."

"What do you think?" Klaus asked. "Do you think it's really possible that one of our parents is alive?"

"I don't know," Violet said. "On one hand, it's hard to believe that Madame Lulu really has a magical crystal ball. On the other hand, she always told Count Olaf where we were so he could come and find us. I don't know what to believe."

"Tent," Sunny whispered.

"I think you're right, Sunny," Klaus said. "If we could sneak into the fortune-telling tent, we might be able to find out something for ourselves."

"You're whispering about me, aren't you?" Kevin called out from the other end of the caravan. "I bet you're saying, 'What a freak Kevin is. Sometimes he shaves with his left hand, and sometimes he shaves with his right hand, but it doesn't matter because they're *exactly the same*!'"

"We weren't talking about you, Kevin," Violet said. "We were discussing the Baudelaire case."

"I never heard of these Baudelaires," Hugo said, combing his hair. "Did I hear you mention they were murderers?"

"That's what it says in *The Daily Punctilio,*" Klaus said.

"Oh, I never read the newspaper," Kevin said. "Holding it in both of my equally strong hands makes me feel like a freak."

“That’s better than me,” Colette said. “I can contort myself into a position that allows me to pick up a newspaper with my tongue. Talk about freakish!”

“It’s an interesting dilemma,” Hugo said, grabbing one of the identical coats from the rack, “but I think that we’re all equally freakish. Now, let’s get out there and put on a good show!”

The Baudelaires followed their coworkers out of the caravan and over to the House of Freaks tent, where the hook-handed man was standing impatiently, holding something long and damp in one of his hooks.

“Get inside and put on a good show,” he ordered, gesturing to a flap in the tent that served as an entrance. “Madame Lulu said that if you don’t give the audience what they want, I’m allowed to use this tagliatelle grande.”

“What’s a tagliatelle grande?” Colette asked.

“Tagliatelle is a type of Italian noodle,” the hook-handed man explained, uncoiling the long and damp object, “and grande means ‘big’ in Italian. This is a big noodle that a carnival worker cooked up for me this morning.” Olaf’s comrade waved the big noodle over his head, and the Baudelaires and their coworkers heard a limp swishing sound as it moved slowly through the air, as if a large earthworm were crawling nearby. “If you don’t do what I say,” the hook-handed man continued, “I get to hit you with the tagliatelle grande, which I’ve heard is an unpleasant and somewhat sticky experience.”

“Don’t worry, sir,” Hugo said. “We’re professionals.”

“I’m glad to hear it,” the hook-handed man sneered, and followed them all into the House of Freaks. Inside, the tent looked even bigger, particularly because there wasn’t very much to see in such a large space. There was a wooden stage with a few folding chairs placed on it, and a banner overhead, which read HOUSE OF FREAKS in large, sloppy letters. There was a small stand where one of the white-faced women was selling cold beverages. And there were seven or eight people milling around, waiting for the show to begin. Madame Lulu had mentioned that business had been slow at Caligari Carnival, but the siblings had still expected a few more people to show up to see the carnival freaks. As the children and their coworkers approached the stage, the hook-handed man began speaking to the small group of people as if they were a vast crowd.

“Ladies and gentlemen, boys and girls, adolescents of both genders,” he announced. “Hurry up and buy your delicious cold beverages, because the House of Freaks show is about to begin!”

“Look at all those freaks!” giggled one member of the audience, a middle-aged man with several large pimples on his chin. “There’s a man with hooks instead of hands!”

“I’m not one of the freaks,” the hook-handed man growled. “I work here at the carnival!”

“Oh, I’m sorry,” the man said. “But if you don’t mind my saying so, if you purchased a pair of realistic hands no one would make that mistake.”

“It’s not polite to comment on other people’s appearances,” the hook-handed man said sternly. “Now, ladies and gentlemen, gaze with horror on Hugo, the hunchback! Instead of a regular back, he has a big hump that makes him look very freakish!”

“That’s true,” said the pimpled man, who seemed willing to giggle at one person or another. “What a freak!”

The hook-handed man waved his large noodle in the air as a limp reminder to the Baudelaires and their coworkers. “Hugo!” he barked. “Put on your coat!”

As the audience tittered, Hugo walked to the front of the stage and tried to put on the coat he was holding. Usually, if someone has a body with an unusual shape, they will hire a tailor to alter their clothing so it will fit comfortably and attractively, but as Hugo struggled with the coat, it was clear that no such tailor had been hired. Hugo’s hump wrinkled the back of the coat, and then stretched it, and then finally ripped it as he did up the buttons, so that within moments the coat was just a few pieces of tattered cloth. Blushing, Hugo retreated to the back of the stage and sat on a folding chair as the members of the tiny audience howled with laughter.

“Isn’t that hilarious?” the hook-handed man said. “He can’t even put on a coat! What a freakish person! But wait, ladies and gentlemen—there’s more!” Olaf’s henchman shook the tagliatelle grande again while reaching into his pocket with his other hook. Smiling wickedly, he withdrew an ear of corn and held it up for the audience to see. “This is a simple ear of corn,” he announced. “It’s something that any normal person can eat. But here at Caligari Carnival, we don’t have a House of Normal People. We have a House of Freaks, with a brand-new freak that will turn this ear of corn into a hilarious mess!”

Violet and Klaus sighed, and walked to the center of the stage, and I do not think that I have to describe this tiresome show any longer. You can undoubtedly guess that the two eldest Baudelaires were forced to eat another ear of corn while a small group of people laughed at them, and that Colette was forced to twist her body into unusual shapes and positions, and that Kevin had to write his name with both his left and right hands, and that finally poor Sunny was forced to growl at the audience, although she was not a ferocious person by nature and would have preferred to greet them politely. And you can imagine how the crowd reacted as the hook-handed man announced each person and forced them to do these things. The seven or eight people laughed, and shouted cruel names, and made terrible and tasteless jokes, and one woman even threw her cold beverage, paper cup and all, at Kevin, as if someone who was both right-handed and left-handed somehow deserved to have wet and sticky stains on his shirt. But what you may not be able to imagine, unless you have had a similar experience yourself, is how humiliating it was to participate in such a show. You might think that being humiliated, like riding a bicycle or decoding a secret message, would get easier after you had done it a few times, but the Baudelaires had been laughed at more than a few times and it didn’t make their experience in the House of Freaks easier at all. Violet remembered when a girl named Carmelita Spats had laughed at her and called her names, when the children were enrolled in Prufrock Preparatory School, but it still hurt her feelings when the hook-handed man announced her as something hilarious. Klaus remembered when Esmé Squalor had insulted him at 667 Dark Avenue, but he still blushed when the audience pointed and giggled every time the ear of corn slipped out of his hands. And Sunny remembered all of the times Count Olaf had laughed at all three Baudelaires and their misfortune, but she still felt embarrassed and a little sick when the people called her “wolf freak” as she followed the other performers out of the tent when the show was over. The Baudelaire orphans even knew that they weren’t really a two-headed person and a wolf baby, but as they sat with their coworkers in the freaks’ caravan afterward, they felt so humiliated that it was as if they were as freakish as everyone thought.

“I don’t like this place,” Violet said to Kevin and Colette, sharing a chair with her brother at the caravan’s table, while Hugo made hot chocolate at the stove. She was so upset that she almost forgot to speak in a low voice. “I don’t like being stared at, and I don’t like being laughed at. If people think it’s funny when someone drops an ear of corn, they should stay home and drop it themselves.”

“Kiwoon!” Sunny agreed, forgetting to growl. She meant something along the lines of, “I thought I was going to cry when all those people were calling me ‘freak,’” but luckily only her siblings understood her, so she didn’t give away her disguise.

“Don’t worry,” Klaus said to his sisters. “I don’t think we’ll stay here very long. The fortune-telling tent is closed today because Count Olaf and Madame Lulu are running that important errand.” The middle Baudelaire did not need to add that it would be a good time to sneak into the tent and find out if Lulu’s crystal ball really held the answers they were seeking.

“Why do you care if Lulu’s tent is closed?” Colette asked. “You’re a freak, not a fortune-teller.”

“And why don’t you want to stay here?” Kevin asked. “Caligari Carnival hasn’t been very popular lately, but there’s nowhere else for a freak to go.”

“Of course there is,” Violet said. “Lots of people are ambidextrous, Kevin. There are ambidextrous florists, and ambidextrous air-traffic controllers, and all sorts of things.”

“You really think so?” Kevin asked.

“Of course I do,” Violet said. “And it’s the same with contortionists and hunchbacks. All of us could find some other type of job where people didn’t think we were freakish at all.”

“I’m not sure that’s true,” Hugo called over from the stove. “I think that a two-headed person is going to be considered pretty freakish no matter where they go.”

“And it’s probably the same with an ambidextrous person,” Kevin said with a sigh.

“Let’s try to forget our troubles and play dominoes,” Hugo said, bringing over a tray with six steaming mugs of hot chocolate. “I thought both of your heads might want to drink separately,” he explained with a smile, “particularly because this hot chocolate is a little bit unusual. Chabo the Wolf Baby added a little bit of cinnamon.”

“Chabo added it?” Klaus asked with surprise, as Sunny growled modestly.

“Yes,” Hugo said. “At first I thought it was some freaky wolf recipe, but it’s actually quite tasty.”

“That was a clever idea, Chabo,” Klaus said, and gave his sister a squinty smile. It seemed only a little while ago that the youngest Baudelaire couldn’t walk, and was small enough to fit inside a birdcage, and now she was developing her own interests, and was big enough to seem half wolf.

“You should be very proud of yourself,” Hugo agreed. “If you weren’t a freak, Chabo, you could grow up to be an excellent chef.”

“She could be a chef anyway,” Violet said. “Elliot, would you mind if we stepped outside to enjoy our hot chocolate?”

"That's a good idea," Klaus said quickly. "I've always considered hot chocolate to be an outdoor beverage, and I'd like to take a peek in the gift caravan."

"Grr," Sunny growled, but her siblings knew she meant "I'll come with you," and she crawled over to where Violet and Klaus were awkwardly rising from their chair.

"Don't be too long," Colette said. "We're not supposed to wander around the carnival."

"We'll just drink our hot chocolate and come right back," Klaus promised.

"I hope you don't get in trouble," Kevin said. "I hate to think of the tagliatelle grande hitting both of your heads."

The Baudelaires were just about to point out that a blow from the tagliatelle grande probably wouldn't hurt one bit, when they heard a noise which was far more fearsome than a large noodle waving in the air. Even from inside the caravan, the children could hear a loud, creaky noise they recognized from their long trip into the hinterlands.

"That sounds like that gentleman friend of Madame Lulu's," Hugo said. "That's the sound of his car."

"There's another sound, too," Colette said. "Listen."

The children listened and heard that the contortionist had spoken the truth. Accompanying the roar of the engine was another roar, one that sounded deeper and angrier than any automobile. The Baudelaires knew that you cannot judge something by its sound any more than you can judge a person by the way they look, but this roar was so loud and fierce that the youngsters could not imagine that it brought good news.

Here I must interrupt the story I am writing, and tell you another story in order to make an important point. This second story is fictional, a word which here means "somebody made it up one day," as opposed to the story of the Baudelaire orphans, which somebody merely wrote down, usually at night. It is called “The Story of Queen Debbie and Her Boyfriend, Tony,” and it goes something like this:

The Story of Queen Debbie and Her Boyfriend, Tony

Once upon a time, there lived a fictional queen named Queen Debbie, who ruled over the land where this story takes place, which is made up. This fictional land had lollipop trees growing everywhere, and singing mice that did all of the chores, and there were fierce and fictional lions who guarded the palace against fictional enemies. Queen Debbie had a boyfriend named Tony, who lived in the neighboring fictional kingdom. Because they lived so far away, Debbie and Tony couldn’t see each other that often, but occasionally they would go out to dinner and a movie, or do other fictional things together.

Tony’s birthday arrived, and Queen Debbie had some royal business and couldn’t travel to see him, but she sent him a nice card and a myna bird in a shiny cage. The proper thing to do if you receive a present, of course, is to write a thank-you note, but Tony was not a particularly proper person, and called Debbie to complain.

“Debbie, this is Tony,” Tony said. “I got the birthday present you sent me, and I don’t like it at all.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” Queen Debbie said, plucking a lollipop off a nearby tree. “I picked out the myna bird especially for you. What sort of present would you prefer?”

“I think you should give me a bunch of valuable diamonds,” said Tony, who was as greedy as he was fictional.

“Diamonds?” Queen Debbie said. “But myna birds can cheer you up when you are sad. You can teach them to sit on your hand, and sometimes they even talk.”

> “I want diamonds,” Tony said.
>
> “But diamonds are so valuable,” Queen Debbie said. “If I send you diamonds in the mail, they’ll probably get stolen on their way to you, and then you won’t have any birthday present at all.”
>
> “I want diamonds,” whined Tony, who was really becoming quite tiresome.
>
> “I know what I’ll do,” Queen Debbie said with a faint smile. “I’ll feed my diamonds to the royal lions, and then send the lions to your kingdom. No one would dare attack a bunch of fierce lions, so the diamonds are sure to arrive safely.”
>
> “Hurry up,” Tony said. “It’s supposed to be my special day.”
>
> It was easy for Queen Debbie to hurry up, because the singing mice who lived in her palace did all of the necessary chores, so it only took a few minutes for her to feed a bunch of diamonds to her lions, wrapping the jewels in tuna fish first so the lions would agree to eat them. Then she instructed the lions to travel to the neighboring kingdom to deliver the present.
>
> Tony waited impatiently outside his house for the rest of the day, eating all of the ice cream and cake and teasing his myna bird, and finally, at just about sunset, he saw the lions approaching on the horizon and ran over to collect his present.
>
> “Give me those diamonds, you stupid lions!”

Tony cried, and there is no need to tell you the rest of this story, which has the rather obvious moral “Never look a gift lion in the mouth.” The point is that there are times where the arrival of a bunch of lions is good news, particularly in a fictional story where the lions are not real and so probably will not hurt you. There are some cases, as in the case of Queen Debbie and her boyfriend, Tony, where the arrival of lions means that the story is about to get much better.

But I am sad to say that the case of the Baudelaire orphans is not one of those times. The story of the Baudelaires does not take place in a fictional land where lollipops grow on trees and singing mice do all of the chores. The story of the Baudelaires takes place in a very real world, where some people are laughed at just because they have something wrong with them, and where children can find themselves all alone in the world, struggling to understand the sinister mystery that surrounds them, and in this real world the arrival of lions means that the story is about to get much worse, and if you do not have a stomach for such a story—any more than lions have a stomach for diamonds not coated in tuna fish—it would be best if you turned around right now and ran the other way, as the Baudelaires wished they could as they exited the caravan and saw what Count Olaf had brought with him when he returned from his errand.

Count Olaf drove his black automobile between the rows of caravans, nearly running over several visitors to the carnival, stopped right at the tent for the House of Freaks, and turned off the engine, which ended the creaky roar the children had recognized. But the other, angrier roar continued as Olaf got out of the car, followed by Madame Lulu, and pointed with a flourish to a trailer that was attached to the rear of the automobile. The trailer was really more of a metal cage on wheels, and through the bars of the cage the Baudelaires could see what the villain was pointing at.

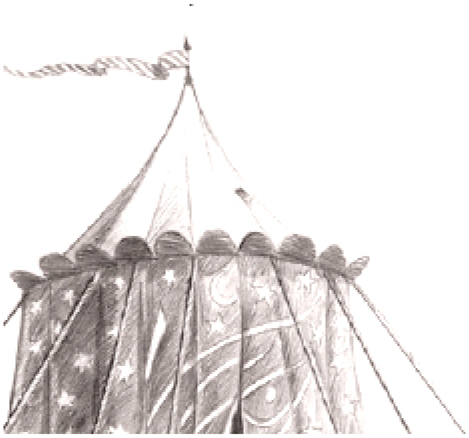
The trailer was filled with lions, packed in so tightly that the children couldn’t tell just how many there were. The lions were unhappy to be traveling in such tight quarters, and were showing their unhappiness by scratching at the cage with their claws, snapping at one another with their long teeth, and roaring as loudly and as fiercely as they could. Some of Count Olaf’s henchmen gathered around, along with several visitors to the carnival, to see what was going on, and Olaf tried to say something to them, but couldn’t be heard over the lions’ roars. Frowning, the villain removed a whip from his pocket and whipped at the lions through the trailer bars. Like people, animals will become frightened and likely do whatever you say if you whip them enough, and the lions finally quieted down so Olaf could make his announcement.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” he said, “boys and girls, freaks and normal people, Caligari Carnival is proud to announce the arrival of these fierce lions, who will be used in a new attraction.”

“That’s good news,” said someone in the crowd, “because the souvenirs in the gift caravan are pretty lousy.”

“It *is* good news,” Count Olaf agreed with a snarl, and turned to face the Baudelaires. His eyes were shining very brightly, and the siblings shivered in their disguises as he looked at the children and then at the gathering crowd. “Things are about to get much better around here,” he said, and the Baudelaire orphans knew that this was as fictional as anything they could imagine.

CHAPTER
Five



If you have ever experienced something that feels strangely familiar, as if the exact same thing has happened to you before, then you are experiencing what the French call “déjà vu.” Like most French expressions—“ennui,” which is a fancy term for severe boredom, or “la petite mort,” which describes a feeling that part of you has died—“déjà vu” refers to something that is usually not very pleasant, and it was not pleasant for the Baudelaire orphans to stand outside the freaks’ caravan listening to Count Olaf and experiencing the queasy feeling of déjà vu.

“These lions are going to be the most exciting thing at Caligari Carnival!” Olaf announced, as more and more people drew near to see what all the fuss was about. “As you all know, unless you are incredibly dim-witted, a stubborn mule will move in the proper direction if there is a carrot in front of it, and a stick behind it. It will move toward the carrot, because it wants the reward of food, and away from the stick, because it does not want the punishment of pain. And these lions will do the same.”

“What’s going on?” Hugo asked the children, walking out of the caravan with Colette and Kevin close behind.

“Déjà vu,” Sunny said bitterly. Even the youngest Baudelaire recognized Count Olaf’s cruel speech about the stubborn mule from when the three children had been living in Olaf’s house. Back then, the villain had talked about a stubborn mule in order to force Violet to marry him, a plot that thankfully had been foiled at the last minute, but now he was using the very same words to cook up another scheme, and it gave the siblings a queasy feeling to watch it happen.

“These lions,” Count Olaf said, “will do as I say, because they want to avoid the punishment of this whip!” With a flourish, he flicked his whip at the lions again, who cowered behind the bars, and some of the visitors to the carnival applauded.

“But if the whip is the stick,” asked the bald man, “what is the carrot?”

“The carrot?” Olaf repeated, and laughed in a particularly nasty way. “The reward for the lions who obey me will be a delicious meal. Lions are carnivorous, which means they eat meat, and here at Caligari Carnival they’ll have the finest meat we have to offer.” He turned and pointed his whip at the entrance to the freaks’ caravan, where the Baudelaires were standing with their coworkers. “The freaks you see here aren’t normal people, and so they lead depressing lives,” he announced. “They’ll be happy to exhibit themselves in the name of entertainment.”

“Of course we will,” Colette said. “We do it every day.”

“Then you won’t mind being the most important part of the lion show,” Olaf replied. “We’re not going to feed these lions regular meals, so they’ll be very, very hungry by the time the show begins. Each day, instead of a show at the House of Freaks, we’ll randomly choose one freak and watch the lions devour them.”

Everyone cheered again, except for Hugo, Colette, Kevin, and the three siblings, who all stood in horrified silence.

“That will be exciting!” said the man with pimples on his face. “Just think—violence and sloppy eating combined in one fabulous show!”

“I couldn’t agree more!” said a woman who was standing nearby. “It was hilarious watching that two-headed freak eat, but it’ll be even more hilarious watching the two-headed freak get eaten!”

“I’d prefer to watch the hunchback get eaten,” said someone else in the crowd. “He’s so funny! He doesn’t even have a regular back!”

“The fun starts tomorrow afternoon!” Count Olaf cried. “See you then!”

“I can’t wait,” said the woman, as the crowd began to disperse, a word which here means “walk off to purchase souvenirs or leave the carnival.” “I’m going to tell all my friends.”

“I’m going to call that reporter at *The Daily Punctilio,*” the man with pimples said, heading toward the phone booth. “This carnival is about to get very popular, and maybe they’ll write an article about it.”

“You were right, boss,” said the hook-handed man. “Things are about to get much better here.”

“Of course he was right, please,” Madame Lulu said. “He is brilliant man, and brave man, and generous man. He is brilliant for thinking of the lion show, please. He is brave man for hitting lions with whip, please. And he is generous man for giving lions to Lulu.”

“He gave those lions to you?” asked a sinister voice. “They were presents?”

Now that most of the carnival visitors had departed, the Baudelaires could see Esmé Squalor step forward from the doorway of another caravan and walk toward Count Olaf and Madame Lulu. As she passed the lions’ trailer, she ran her enormous fingernails along the bars, and the lions whimpered in fear. “So you gave Madame Lulu some lions,” she said. “What did you get me?”

Count Olaf scratched his head with one scraggly hand, and looked a little embarrassed. “Nothing,” he admitted. “But you can share my whip, if you’d like.”

Madame Lulu leaned over and gave Olaf a kiss on the cheek. “He gave lions to me, please, because I did such wonderful fortune-telling.”

“You should have seen it, Esmé,” Olaf said. “Lulu and I entered the fortune-telling tent and turned out all the lights, and the crystal ball began to hum its magical hum. Then, magical lightning crackled above us, and Madame Lulu told me to concentrate as hard as I could. While I closed my eyes, she gazed into her crystal ball and told me that one of the Baudelaire parents is alive and hiding in the Mortmain Mountains. As a reward, I gave her these lions.”

“So Madame Lulu needs a carrot, too, eh?” the hook-handed man said with a laugh.

“First thing tomorrow morning,” Olaf continued, “Madame Lulu will consult her crystal ball again, and tell me where the Baudelaires are.”

Esmé glared at Lulu. “And what sort of gift will you give then, Olaf?”

“Be reasonable, my dear,” Count Olaf said to his girlfriend. “The lions will make Caligari Carnival much more popular, so Madame Lulu can devote her time to fortune-telling and give us the information we need to finally steal the Baudelaire fortune.”

“I hate to criticize,” Hugo said hesitantly, “but is there any way we can make the carnival more popular without feeding us to the lions? I must confess that I’m a little nervous about that part.”

“You heard the crowd when I told them about the new attraction,” Count Olaf said. “They couldn’t wait to see the lions devour you, and all of us need to do our part to give people what they want. Your part is to return to the freaks’ caravan until tomorrow. And the rest of us will do our part and start digging the pit.”

“Pit?” one of the white-faced women asked. “What do we need a pit for?”

“To keep the lions in,” Olaf replied, “so they only eat whichever freak jumps down there. Let’s dig it over by the roller coaster.”

“Good idea, boss,” the bald man said.

“There are shovels in tool caravan,” Lulu said. “I will show you, please.”

“I’m not going to dig a pit,” Esmé announced as the others walked away. “I might break a nail. Besides, I need to talk to Count Olaf—*alone*.”

“Oh, all right,” Count Olaf said. “Let’s go in the guest caravan where we won’t be disturbed.”

Olaf and Esmé walked off in one direction, and Madame Lulu led the henchmen in the other, leaving the three children alone with their coworkers.

“Well, we’d better go inside,” Colette said. “Maybe we can think of a way not to get eaten.”

“Oh, let’s not think about those fearsome creatures,” Hugo said with a shudder. “Let’s play another game of dominoes instead.”

“Chabo, my other head, and I will be along in a moment,” Violet said. “We want to finish our hot chocolate.”

“You might as well enjoy it,” Kevin said glumly, following Hugo and Colette back into the freaks’ caravan. “It might turn out to be the last hot chocolate you ever drink.”

Kevin shut the door with both hands, and the Baudelaires stepped farther away from the caravan so they could talk without being overheard.

“Adding cinnamon to hot chocolate is a terrific idea, Sunny,” Violet said, “but I’m having trouble enjoying it.”

“Ificat,” Sunny said, which meant “Me too.”

"Count Olaf's latest scheme leaves a bad taste in my mouth," Klaus said, "and I don't think cinnamon will help."

"We have to get into that fortune-telling tent," Violet said, "and this may be our only chance."

"Do you think it's really true?" Klaus asked. "Do you think Madame Lulu really saw something in her crystal ball?"

"I don't know," Violet said, "but I do know from my studies of electricity that lightning can't appear inside a tent. Something mysterious is going on, and we need to find out what it is."

"Chow!" Sunny said, which meant "Before we're thrown to the lions!"

"But do you think it's real?" Klaus asked.

"I don't know," Violet said testily, a word which here means "in her regular voice, forgetting her disguise because she was becoming very frustrated and upset." "I don't know if Madame Lulu is a fortune-teller. I don't know how Count Olaf always knows where we are. I don't know where the Snicket file is, or why someone else had Olaf's tattoo, or what V.F.D. stands for, or why there's a secret passageway that leads to our house, or—"

"If our parents are alive?" Klaus interrupted. "Do you know if one of our parents is really alive?"

The middle Baudelaire's voice quivered, and his sisters turned to look at him—a feat that was difficult for Violet, who was still sharing his shirt—and saw that he was crying. Violet leaned so that her head was against his while Sunny put her mug down and crawled closer to hug his knees, and the three Baudelaires stood quietly together for a few moments.

Grief, a type of sadness that most often occurs when you have lost someone you love, is a sneaky thing, because it can disappear for a long time, and then pop back up when you least expect it. When I am able, I go out walking on Briny Beach very early in the morning, which is the best time to find materials important to the Baudelaire case, and the ocean is so peaceful that I feel peaceful, too, as if I am no longer grieving for the woman I love and will never see again. But then, when I am cold and duck into a teashop where the owner is expecting me, I have only to reach for the sugar bowl before my grief returns, and I find myself crying so loudly that other customers ask me if I could possibly lower my sobs. With the Baudelaire orphans, it was as if their grief were a very heavy object that they each took turns carrying so that they would not all be crying at once, but sometimes the object was too heavy for one of them to move without weeping, so Violet and Sunny stood next to Klaus, reminding him that this was something they could all carry together until at last they found a safe place to lay it down.

“I’m sorry I was testy, Klaus,” Violet said. “There’s just so much we don’t know that it’s hard to think about all at once.”

“Chithvee,” Sunny said, which meant “But I can’t help thinking about our parents.”

“Me neither,” Violet admitted. “I keep wondering if one of them survived the fire.”

“But if they did,” Klaus said, “why would they be hiding in a faraway place? Why aren’t they trying to find us?”

“Maybe they are,” Violet said quietly. “Maybe they’re searching for us everywhere they can think of, but they can’t find us, because we’ve been hiding and disguising ourselves for so long.”

“But why doesn’t our mother or father contact Mr. Poe?” Klaus said.

“We’ve tried to contact him,” Violet pointed out, “but he doesn’t answer our telegrams, and we can’t seem to reach him by phone. If one of our parents has survived the fire, maybe they’re having the same wretched luck.”

“Galfuskin,” Sunny pointed out. By “Galfuskin” she meant something like, “This is all guesswork—let’s go to the fortune-telling tent and see if we can find out anything for sure, and we'd better do it soon before the others get back."

"You're right, Sunny," Violet said, and put her mug down next to Sunny's. Klaus put down his mug, and all three Baudelaires took disguised steps away from their hot chocolate. Violet and Klaus walked awkwardly in their shared pants, leaning against one another with every step, and Sunny followed alongside, still crawling so that she would look half wolf if anyone watched them as they made their way through the carnival toward the fortune-telling tent. But no one was watching the Baudelaire orphans. The visitors to the carnival had gone home to tell their friends about the lion show happening the next day. The children's coworkers were in the freaks' caravan bemoaning their fate, a word which here means "playing dominoes, rather than trying to think of a way out of their predicament." Madame Lulu and Olaf's assistants were digging the pit, over by the roller coaster still covered in ivy. Count Olaf and Esmé Squalor were bickering in the guest caravan, which was located at the far end of the carnival where I had stayed with my brother so many years ago, and the rest of Madame Lulu's employees were closing down the carnival and hoping that someday they might work in a less miserable place. So nobody was watching as the children approached the tent next to Lulu's caravan, and stopped for a minute at the flap that led inside.

The fortune-telling tent no longer stands at Caligari Carnival, or anywhere else for that matter. Anyone wandering through the blackened and desolate hinterlands would scarcely be able to tell that there had been any tents at all. But even if everything looked exactly the same as when the Baudelaire orphans stayed there, it is unlikely that a traveler would understand what the tent's decoration meant, as nowadays there are so few living experts on such subjects, and the experts who are alive are all in terrible circumstances, or, in my case, on their way to terrible circumstances in the hopes of making them less terrible. But the Baudelaire orphans—who, as you will recall, had only arrived at the carnival the night before, and so had never seen the fortune-telling tent in daylight until this very moment—could see how the tent was decorated, which is why they stopped to stare at it.

At first glance, the painting on the fortune-telling tent seemed to depict an eye, like the decoration on Madame Lulu's caravan and the tattoo on Count Olaf's ankle. The three children had seen similar eyes wherever they went, from a building in the shape of an eye when they were working in a lumbermill, to an eye on Esmé Squalor's purse when they were hiding in a hospital, to a huge swarm of eyes that surrounded them in their most frightening nightmares, and although the siblings never understood quite what these eyes meant, they were so weary of gazing at them that they would never pause to look at one again. But there are many things in life that become different if you take a long look at them, and as the children paused in front of the fortune-telling tent, the painting seemed to change before their very eyes, until it did not seem like a painting at all, but an insignia.

An insignia is sort of a mark that usually stands for an organization or a business, and the mark can be of any sort whatsoever. Sometimes an insignia can be a simple shape, such as a wavy line to indicate an organization concerned with rivers or oceans, or a square to indicate an organization concerned with geometry or sugar cubes. Sometimes an insignia can be a small picture of something, such as a torch, to indicate an organization that is flammable, or the three-eyed girl outside the House of Freaks, indicating that people who were unusual in some way were on display inside. And sometimes an insignia can be part of the name of the organization, such as the first few letters, or its initials. The Baudelaires, of course, were not involved in any sort of business, aside from disguising themselves as carnival freaks, and as far as they knew they were not members of an organization of any kind, and they had never even been to the hinterlands until Count Olaf's car had taken them down Rarely Ridden Road, but the three children took a long look at the insignia on Madame Lulu's tent, because they knew that it was important to them somehow, as if whoever had painted the insignia knew they would come here, and wanted to bring them inside.

"Do you think…" Klaus said, his voice trailing off as he squinted at the tent.

"I didn't see it at first glance," Violet said, "but as I took a long look…"

“Volu…” Sunny said, and without another word the three children peered into the entrance, and, seeing no sign of anyone inside, took a few steps forward. If someone had been watching the youngsters, they would have seen these few hesitant steps as they entered the fortune-teller’s tent as quietly as they could. But there was no one watching. There was no one to see the flap of cloth as it closed quietly behind them, making the whole tent shiver ever so slightly, and there was no one to notice that the painting shivered, too. There was no one watching the Baudelaire orphans as they drew closer to finding the answers to their questions, or solving the mysteries of their lives. There was no one to take a long look at the painting on the tent to see that it was not an image of an eye, as it appeared to be at first glance, but an insignia, standing for an organization the children knew only as V.F.D.

CHAPTER
Six

There are many difficult things in this world to hide, but a secret is not one of them. It is difficult to hide an airplane, for instance, because you generally need to find a deep hole or an enormous haystack, and sneak the airplane inside in the middle of the night, but it is easy to hide a secret about an airplane, because you can merely write it on a tiny piece of paper and tape it to the bottom of your mattress any time you are at home. It is difficult to hide a symphony orchestra, because you usually need to rent a soundproof room and borrow as many sleeping bags as you can find, but it is easy to hide a secret about a symphony orchestra, because you can merely whisper it into the ear of a trustworthy friend or music critic. And it is difficult to hide yourself, because you sometimes need to stuff yourself into the trunk of an automobile, or concoct a disguise out of whatever you can find, but it is easy to hide a secret about yourself, because you can merely type it into a book and hope it falls into the right hands. My dear sister, if you are reading this, I am still alive, and heading north to try and find you.

Had the Baudelaire orphans been looking for an airplane as they stepped inside Madame Lulu's fortune-telling tent, they would have known to look for the tip of a wing, sticking out from under an enormous black tablecloth decorated with shiny silver stars, which hung over a table in the center of the tent. Had they been looking for a symphony orchestra, they would have known to listen for the sound of someone coughing or bumping up against an oboe as they hid in the corners of the tent, which were covered in heavy curtains. But the children were not looking for methods of air travel or professional musicians. They were looking for secrets, and the tent was so big that they scarcely knew where to begin looking. Was there news of the Baudelaire parents hidden in the cupboard that stood near the entrance? Could there be information about the Snicket file stuffed into the large trunk that stood in one of the corners? And was it possible the children could find out the meaning of V.F.D. by gazing into the crystal ball placed in the center of the table? Violet, Klaus, and Sunny looked around the tent, and then at one another, and it seemed that the secrets concerning them could be hidden just about anywhere.

"Where do you think we should look?" Violet asked.

"I don't know," Klaus replied, squinting all around him. "I'm not even sure what to look for."

"Well, maybe we should look for answers the way Count Olaf did," Violet said. "He told the whole story of his fortune-telling experience."

"I remember," Klaus said. "First he entered Madame Lulu's tent. We've done that. Then, he said they turned out all the lights."

The Baudelaires looked up, and noticed for the first time that the ceiling of the tent was decorated with small lights in the shape of stars, matching the stars on the tablecloth.

"Switch!" Sunny said, pointing to a pair of switches attached to one of the tent poles.

"Good work, Sunny," Violet said. "Here, Klaus, walk with me so I can get a look at those switches."

The two older Baudelaires walked freakishly over to the pole, but when they reached the switches Violet frowned and shook her head.

“What’s wrong?” Klaus asked.

“I wish I had a ribbon,” Violet said, “to tie up my hair. It’s hard to think seriously with my powdery hair getting in my eyes. But my hair ribbon is somewhere at Heimlich….”

Her voice trailed off, and Klaus saw that she had reached her hand into the pocket of Count Olaf’s pants and was drawing out a ribbon that looked just like the one she usually wore.

“Yerz,” Sunny said.

“It *is* mine,” Violet said, looking at it closely. “Count Olaf must have kept it when he was preparing me for surgery, and left it in his pocket.”

“I’m glad you got it back,” Klaus said, with a slight shudder. “I don’t like to think about Olaf getting his filthy hands on our possessions. Do you need some help tying your hair up? It might be difficult using only one hand, and I don’t think you should take your other one out from under the shirt. We don’t want to mess up our disguise.”

“I think I can manage it with one hand,” Violet said. “Ah, there we go. I feel less like a freak and more like Violet Baudelaire with my hair up like this. Now, let’s see. Both these switches are attached to wires that run up to the top of the tent. One of them obviously controls the lights, but what does the other one do?”

The Baudelaires looked up again, and saw something else attached to the ceiling of the tent. In between the stars was a small, round mirror, hanging from a piece of metal, which held it at an odd angle. Attached to the metal was a long strip of rubber, which led to a large knot of wires and gears, which in turn was attached to some more mirrors arranged in a sort of wheel.

“What?” Sunny asked.

“I don’t know,” Klaus said. “It sure doesn’t look like anything I’ve read about.”

“It’s an invention of some sort,” Violet said, studying it carefully. She began to point to different parts of the strange device, but it was as if she were talking to herself instead of her siblings. “That piece of rubber looks like a fan belt, which transmits torque from an automotive engine in order to help cool the radiator. But why would you want to—oh, I see. It moves those other mirrors around, which—but how would—wait a minute. Klaus, see that small hole in the upper corner of the tent?”

“Not without my glasses,” Klaus said.

“Well, there’s a small rip up there,” Violet said. “What direction are we facing, if we face that small hole?”

“Let me think for a moment,” Klaus said. “Last night, the sun was setting as we got out of the car.”

“Yirat,” Sunny said, which meant “I remember—the famous hinterlands sunset.”

“And the car is over there,” Klaus said, turning around and dragging his older sister with them. “So that way is west, and the rip in the tent faces east.”

“East,” Violet said with a smile, “the direction of the sunrise.”

“That’s right,” Klaus said, “but what does that have to do with anything?”

Violet said nothing, just stood and smiled at her siblings, and Klaus and Sunny smiled back. Even with the fake scars penciled on her face, Violet was smiling in a way the other Baudelaires recognized at once. It was the sort of smile that appeared when Violet had figured out a difficult problem, usually having to do with an invention of some sort. She had smiled this way when the siblings were in jail, and she figured out how a pitcher of water could help break them out. She had smiled this way when she had looked over some evidence she had found in a suitcase, which could convince Mr. Poe that their Uncle Monty had been murdered. And she was smiling this way now, as she looked up at the strange device on the ceiling, and then back down at the two switches on the wall.

“Watch this,” she said, and flicked the first switch. Immediately, the gears began to spin, and the long strip of rubber began to move, and the wheel of mirrors became a whirring circle.

“But what does it do?” Klaus said.

“Listen,” Violet said, and the children could hear a low, buzzing hum coming from the machine. “That’s the hum Count Olaf was talking about. He thought it was coming from the crystal ball, but it was coming from this invention.”

“I thought a magical hum sounded fishy,” Klaus said.

“Legror?” Sunny asked, which meant “But what about the lightning?”

“You see how that larger mirror is angled?” Violet said. “It’s pointed so that it reflects any light that comes out of the small hole in the tent.”

“But there isn’t any light coming from it,” Klaus said.

“Not now,” Violet said, “because the hole is facing east, and it’s late in the afternoon. But in the morning, when Madame Lulu does her fortune-telling, the sun is rising, and the light of the sunrise would shine right on that mirror. And that mirror would reflect it onto the other mirrors, put into motion by the torquated belt—”

“Wait,” Klaus said. “I don’t understand.”

“That’s O.K.,” Violet said. “Count Olaf doesn’t understand either. When he walks into the tent in the morning, Madame Lulu turns this invention on and the room is filled with flickering lights. Remember when I used the refraction of light to make a signaling device at Lake Lachrymose? It’s the same thing, but Lulu tells him that it’s magical lightning.”

“But wouldn’t Olaf look up and see that it wasn’t magical lightning?”

“Not if the lights were off,” Violet said, flicking the other switch, and above them the stars went out. The cloth of the tent was so thick that no light from outside shone in, and the Baudelaires found themselves in utter darkness. It reminded the children of when they were climbing down the elevator shaft of 667 Dark Avenue, except that had been silent, and here they were surrounded by the sound of the machine’s hum.

“Eerie,” Sunny said.

“It *is* spooky,” Klaus agreed. “No wonder Olaf thought it was a magical hum.”

“Imagine how it would feel if the room were flickering with lightning,” Violet said. “That’s the sort of trickery that makes people believe in fortune-telling.”

“So Madame Lulu is a fake,” Klaus said.

Violet flicked both switches again, and the lights went on as the invention went off. “She’s a fake, all right,” Violet said. “I bet that crystal ball is just plain glass. She tricks Count Olaf into thinking she’s a fortune-teller, so he’ll buy her things like lions and new turbans.”

“Chesro?” Sunny asked, and looked up at her siblings. By “Chesro?” Sunny meant something along the lines of, “But if she’s a fake, how did she know that one of our parents was alive?” but her siblings were almost afraid to answer her.

“She didn’t, Sunny,” Violet said quietly. “Madame Lulu’s information is as fake as her magic lightning.”

Sunny made a small, quiet sound that her siblings could scarcely hear behind her beard, and hugged Violet and Klaus’s legs while her little body shivered with sadness. Suddenly, it was Sunny’s turn to bear the burden of Baudelaire grief, but she did not bear it for long, because Klaus thought of something that made the Baudelaires collect themselves.

“Wait a minute,” Klaus said. “Madame Lulu may be a fake, but her information might be real. After all, she always told Count Olaf where we were staying, and she was right about that.”

“That’s true,” Violet said. “I forgot about that.”

“After all,” Klaus said, reaching with difficulty into his pocket. “We first thought that one of our parents might be alive after we read this.” He unfolded a piece of paper that his sisters recognized as the thirteenth page of the Snicket file. There was a photograph, stapled to the page, which showed the Baudelaire parents, standing next to one man the Baudelaires had met briefly at the Village of Fowl Devotees, and one man the children did not recognize, and below the photograph was a sentence Klaus had read so many times that he did not need his glasses to read it again. “‘Because of the evidence discussed on page nine, experts now suspect that there may in fact be one survivor of the fire, but the survivor’s whereabouts are unknown,’” he recited. “Maybe Madame Lulu knows about this.”

“But how?” Violet asked.

“Well, let’s see,” Klaus said. “Count Olaf said that after the appearance of magical lightning, Madame Lulu told him to close his eyes so she could concentrate.”

“There!” Sunny said, pointing to the table with the crystal ball.

“No, Sunny,” Violet said. “The crystal ball couldn’t tell her. It’s not magical, remember?”

“There!” Sunny insisted, and walked over to the table. Violet and Klaus followed her, walking awkwardly, and saw what she was pointing at. Sticking out from under the tablecloth was a tiny speck of white. Kneeling down in their shared pants, the older Baudelaires could see it was the very edge of a piece of paper.

“Good thing you’re closer to the ground than we are, Sunny,” said Klaus. “We never would have noticed that.”

“But what is it?” Violet asked, sliding it out from under the tablecloth.

Klaus reached into his pocket again, removed his glasses, and put them on. “Now I feel less like a freak and more like myself,” he said with a smile, and began to read out loud. “‘My Dear Duchess, Your masked ball sounds like a fantastic evening, and I look forward to…’” His voice trailed off, and he scanned the rest of the page. “It’s just a note about some party,” he said.

“What’s it doing underneath a tablecloth?” Violet asked.

“It doesn’t seem important to me,” Klaus said, “but I guess it was important enough to Lulu that she hid it.

“Let’s see what else she’s hiding,” Violet said, and lifted the end of the tablecloth. All three Baudelaires gasped.

It may seem strange to read that there was a library underneath Madame Lulu’s table, but as the Baudelaire orphans knew, there are almost as many kinds of libraries as there are kinds of readers. The children had encountered a private library at the home of Justice Strauss, who they missed very much, and a scientific library at the home of Uncle Monty, who they would never see again. They had seen an academic library at Prufrock Preparatory School, and a library at Lucky Smells Lumbermill that was understocked, a word which here means “empty except for three books.” There are public libraries and medical libraries, secret libraries and forbidden libraries, libraries of records and libraries of auction catalogs, and there are archival libraries, which is a fancy term for a collection of files and documents rather than books. Archival libraries are usually found at universities, museums, or other quiet places—such as underneath a table—where people can go and examine whatever papers they like, in order to find the information they need. The Baudelaire orphans gazed at the enormous piles of papers that were stuffed underneath the table, and realized that Madame Lulu had an archival library that just might contain the information they were looking for.

“Look at all this,” Violet said. “There are newspaper articles, magazines, letters, files, photographs—all sorts of documents. Madame

Lulu tells people to close their eyes and concentrate, and then she looks through all this material and finds the answers.”

“And they can’t hear her shuffling paper,” Klaus said, “over the hum of the lightning device.”

“It’s like taking a test,” Violet said, “with all the answers hidden in your school desk.”

“Cheat!” Sunny said.

“It *is* cheating,” Klaus said, “but maybe her cheating can help us. Look, here’s an article from *The Daily Punctilio.*”

“VILLAGE OF FOWL DEVOTEES TO PARTICIPATE IN NEW GUARDIAN PROGRAM,” Violet said, peering over his shoulder at the headline.

“‘The Council of Elders announced yesterday that they would care for the troublesome Baudelaire orphans,’” Klaus read, “‘as part of the city government’s new program inspired by the aphorism “It takes a village to raise a child.”’”

“That’s how Count Olaf found us!” Violet said. “Madame Lulu pretended that the crystal ball told her where we were, but she just read it in the newspaper!”

Klaus flipped through a pile of paper until he saw his own name on a list. “Look,” he said. “It’s a list of new students at Prufrock Preparatory School. Somehow Madame Lulu got ahold of it and passed on the information to Olaf.”

“Us!” Sunny said, showing a photograph to her siblings. Violet and Klaus looked at it and saw their sister was right. The youngest Baudelaire had found a small, blurry photograph of the three Baudelaires sitting on the edge of Damocles Dock, where they had arrived for their stay with Aunt Josephine. In the background they could see Mr. Poe reaching his hand out to call for a taxi, while Violet stared glumly into a paper sack.

"Those are the peppermints Mr. Poe gave us," Violet said quietly. "I'd almost forgotten about those."

"But who took this?" Klaus asked. "Who was watching us that day?"

"Back," Sunny said, and turned the photograph over. On the back, someone had written something in messy handwriting the children could scarcely read.

"I think it says, 'This might be hopeful,'" Klaus said.

"Or 'helpful,'" Violet said. "'This might be helpful.' And it's signed with one initial—I think it's an R, or maybe a K. But who would want a photograph of us?"

"It gives me the shivers to think someone took our picture when we didn't know it," Klaus said. "That means someone could be taking our photograph at any moment."

The Baudelaires looked around hurriedly, but could see no photographer lurking in the tent. "Let's calm down," Violet said. "Remember the time we watched a scary movie when our parents were out for the evening, and we were jumpy for the rest of the night? Every time we heard a noise we thought vampires were breaking into the house to take us away."

"Maybe somebody *was* breaking into the house to take us away," Klaus said, and pointed to the photograph. "Sometimes things can go on right in front of your nose, but you don't know about them."

"Heebie-jeebies," Sunny said, which meant something like, "Let's get out of here. I'm really getting the creeps."

"Me, too," Violet said, "but let's take all these documents with us. Maybe we can find someplace to look through them and find the information we want."

"We can't take all these papers with us," Klaus said. "There are stacks and stacks. It would be like checking out every single book in the library, just to find the one you wanted to read."

"We'll stuff our pockets," Violet said.

"My pockets are already stuffed," Klaus said. "I have page thirteen of the Snicket file, and all those fragments from the Quagmire notebooks. I can't get rid of those, but I don't have room for anything else. It's as if all the world's secrets are here on paper, but which secrets do we take with us?"

"Maybe we can look through it quickly right here," Violet said, "and take anything that has our names on it."

"That's not the best method of research," Klaus said, "but I guess it will have to do. Here, help me lift the tablecloth so we can see everything better."

Violet and Klaus began to lift the tablecloth together, but it was quite difficult to do in their disguise. Like eating an ear of corn, lifting the tablecloth while sharing a shirt was trickier than it looked, and the tablecloth slid back and forth as the older Baudelaires struggled with it. As I'm sure you know, if you slide a tablecloth back and forth, the things sitting on the tablecloth will slide, too, and Madame Lulu's crystal ball began to slide closer and closer to the edge of the table.

"Mishap," Sunny said.

"Sunny's right," Violet said. "Let's be careful."

"Right," Klaus said. "We don't want—"

Klaus did not get to finish his sentence about what he and his sisters did not want, because with a dull *thunk* and a loud, clattering *crash!* his sentence was finished for him. One of the most troublesome things in life is that what you do or do not want has very little to do with what does or does not happen. You might want to become the sort of author who works calmly at home, for example, but something could happen that would lead you to become the sort of author who works frantically in the homes of other people, often without their knowledge. You might want to marry someone you love very much, but something could happen that would prevent the two of you from ever seeing one another again. You might want to find out something important about your parents, but something could happen that would mean you wouldn’t find out for quite some time. And you might want, at a particular moment, for a crystal ball not to fall off a table and shatter into a thousand pieces, and even if it happened that the crystal ball did shatter, you might want the sound not to attract anyone’s attention. But the sad truth is that the truth is sad, and that what you want does not matter. A series of unfortunate events can happen to anyone, no matter what they want, and even though the three children did not want the flap of the fortune-telling tent to open, and they did not want Madame Lulu to step inside, as the afternoon turned to evening at Caligari Carnival, everything happened to the Baudelaire orphans that they did not want at all.

CHAPTER
Seven

“What are you doing here, please?” Madame Lulu snarled. She strode quickly toward them, her own eyes glaring as angrily as the eye she was wearing around her neck. “What are the freaks doing in the tent, please, and what are the freaks doing under the table, please, and please answer me this instant, please, or you will be very, very sorry, please, thank you!”

The Baudelaire orphans looked up at the fake fortune-teller, and a strange thing happened. Rather than quaking with fear, or crying out in horror, or huddling together as Lulu shrieked at them, the three children stood resolute, a phrase which here means “did not become frightened at all.” Now that they knew that Madame Lulu used a machine on her ceiling and an archival library under her table to disguise herself as a magical and mysterious person, it was as if every frightening thing about her had melted away, and she was just a woman with an odd accent and a bad temper who had crucial information the Baudelaires needed. As Madame Lulu carried on, Violet, Klaus, and Sunny watched her without a terrified thought in their heads. Madame Lulu yelled and yelled, but the children felt just as angry at Lulu as Lulu was at them.

“How dare you, please, enter the tent without permission of Madame Lulu!” Madame Lulu cried. “I am the boss of Caligari Carnival, please, and you must obey me every single moment of your freakish lives! Please, I have never seen, please, the freaks who are so ungrateful to Madame Lulu! You are in the worst of the trouble, please!” By now, Lulu had reached the table, and saw the pile of broken glass which sparkled all over the floor. “You are the breakers of the crystal ball!” she bellowed, pointing a dirty fingernail at the Baudelaires. “You should be ashamed of your freaky selves! The crystal ball is the very valuable thing, please, and is having of the magical powers!”

“Fraud!” Sunny cried.

“That crystal ball wasn’t magical!” Violet translated angrily. “It was plain glass! And you’re not a real fortune-teller, either! We analyzed your lightning device, and we found your archival library.”

“This is all one big disguise,” Klaus said, gesturing around the tent. “*You’re* the one who should be ashamed of yourself.”

“Ple—” Madame Lulu said, but she shut her mouth before she could finish the word. She looked down at the Baudelaires, and her eyes grew very wide. Then she sat down in a chair, lay her head down next to the crystal ball, and began to cry. “I am ashamed of myself,” she said, in an unaccented voice, and reached up to her turban. With a flick of her wrist, she unraveled the turban, and her long, blond hair fell down around her tearstained face. “I am utterly ashamed of myself,” she said, through her tears, and her shoulders shook with sobs.

The Baudelaires looked at one another and then at the quaking woman sitting near them. It is hard for decent people to stay angry at someone who has burst into tears, which is why it is often a good idea to burst into tears if a decent person is yelling at you. The three children watched as Madame Lulu cried and cried, pausing only to wipe her eyes with her sleeves, and they could not help but feel a little bit sad, too, even as their anger continued.

“Madame Lulu,” Violet said firmly, although not as firmly as she would have liked, “why did you—”

“Oh,” Madame Lulu cried, at the sound of her name, “don’t call me that.” She reached up to her neck and yanked on the cord that held the eye around her neck. It broke with a *snap!* and she dropped it to the ground where it lay amid the pieces of shattered glass while she went on sobbing. “My name is Olivia,” she said finally, with a shuddering sigh. “I’m not Madame Lulu and I’m not a fortune-teller.”

“But why are you pretending to be these things?” Klaus asked. “Why are you wearing a disguise? Why are you helping Count Olaf?”

“I try to help everyone,” Olivia said sadly. “My motto is ‘give people what they want.’ That’s why I’m here at the carnival. I pretend to be a fortune-teller, and tell people whatever it is they want to hear. If Count Olaf or one of his henchmen steps inside and asks me where the Baudelaires are, I tell them. If Jacques Snicket or another volunteer steps inside and asks me if his brother is alive, I tell them.”

The Baudelaires felt so many questions tripping up inside them that they could scarcely decide which one to ask. “But where do you learn the answers?” Violet asked, pointing to the piles of paper underneath the table. “Where does all this information come from?”

“Libraries, mostly,” Olivia said, wiping her eyes. “If you want people to think you’re a fortune-teller, you have to answer their questions, and the answer to nearly every question is written down someplace. It just might take a while to find. It’s taken me a long time to gather my archival library, and I still don’t have all of the answers I’ve been looking for. So sometimes, when someone asks me a question and I don’t know the answer, I just make something up.”

“When you told Count Olaf that one of our parents was alive,” Klaus asked, “were you making it up, or did you know the answer?”

Olivia frowned. “Count Olaf didn’t ask anything about the parents of any carnival frea—wait a minute. Your voices sound different. Beverly, you have a ribbon in your hair, and your other head is wearing glasses. What’s going on?”

The three children looked at one another in surprise. They had been so interested in what Olivia was saying that they had completely forgotten about their disguises, but now it appeared that disguises might not be necessary. The siblings needed to have their questions answered honestly, and it seemed more likely that Olivia would give them honest answers if the children were honest themselves. Without speaking, the Baudelaires stood up and removed their disguises. Violet and Klaus unbuttoned the shirt they were sharing, stretching the arms they had been keeping cooped up, and then stepped out of the fur-cuffed pants, while Sunny unwrapped the beard from around her. In no time at all the Baudelaires were standing in the tent in their regular clothing—except for Violet, who was still wearing a hospital gown from her stay in the Surgical Ward—with their disguises on the floor in a heap. The older Baudelaires even shook their heads vigorously, a word which here means "in order to shake talcum powder out of their hair," and rubbed at their faces so their disguised scars would disappear.

"I'm not really Beverly," Violet said, "and this is my brother, not my other head. And that's not Chabo the Wolf Baby. She's—"

"I know who she is," Olivia said, looking at all of them amazedly. "I know who all of you are. You're the Baudelaires!"

"Yes," Klaus said, and he and his sisters smiled. It felt as if it had been one hundred years since someone had called the Baudelaires by their proper names, and when Olivia recognized them, it was as if they were finally themselves again, instead of carnival freaks or any other fake identity. "Yes," Klaus said again. "We're the Baudelaires—three of them, anyway. We're not sure, but we think there may be a fourth. We think one of our parents may be alive."

"Not sure?" Olivia asked. "Isn't the answer in the Snicket file?"

"We just have the last page of the Snicket file," Klaus said, and pulled page thirteen out of his pocket again. "We're trying to find the rest of it before Olaf does. But the last page says that there may be a survivor of the fire. Do you know if that's true?"

"I have no idea," Olivia admitted. "I've been looking for the Snicket file myself. Every time I see a piece of paper blow by, I chase after it to see if it's one of the pages."

“But you told Count Olaf that one of our parents is alive,” Violet said, “and that they’re hiding in the Mortmain Mountains.”

“I was just guessing,” Olivia said. “If one of your parents has survived, though, that’s probably where they’d be. Somewhere in the Mortmain Mountains is one of the last surviving headquarters of V.F.D. But you know that, of course.”

“We don’t know that,” Klaus said. “We don’t even know what V.F.D. stands for.”

“Then how did you learn to disguise yourselves?” Olivia asked in astonishment. “You used all three phases of V.F.D. Disguise Training—veiled facial disguises, with your fake scars, various finery disguises, with the clothing you wore, and voice fakery disguises, with the different voices you used. Now that I think of it, you’re even using disguises that look like things in my disguise kit.”

Olivia stood up and walked over to the trunk that sat in the corner. Taking a key out of her pocket, she unlocked it and began to go through its contents. The siblings watched as she lifted an assortment of things out of the trunk, all of which the children recognized. First she removed a wig that looked like the one Count Olaf had used when he was pretending to be a woman named Shirley, and then a fake wooden leg he had used as part of his ship captain disguise. She removed a pair of pots that Olaf’s bald associate had used when the children were living in Paltryville, and a motorcycle helmet that looked identical to the one Esmé Squalor had used to disguise herself as a police officer. Finally, Olivia held up a shirt with fancy ruffles all over it, exactly like the one that lay at the Baudelaires’ feet. “You see,” she said. “This is the same shirt as the one you two were wearing.”

“But we got ours from Count Olaf’s trunk,” Violet said.

“That makes sense,” Olivia replied. “All volunteers have the same disguise kit. There are people using these disguises all over the world, trying to bring Count Olaf to justice.”

"What?" Sunny asked.

"I'm confused, too," Klaus said. "We're all confused, Olivia. What is V.F.D.? Sometimes it seems like they're good people, and sometimes it seems like they're bad people."

"It's not as simple as all that," Olivia said sadly. She took a surgical mask out of the trunk and held it in her hand. "The items in the disguise kit are just things, Baudelaires. You can use these things to help people or to harm them, and many people use them to do both. Sometimes it's hard to know which disguise to use, or what to do once you've put one on."

"I don't understand," Violet said.

"Some people are like those lions Olaf brought here," Olivia said. "They start out being good people, but before they know it they've become something else. Those lions used to be noble creatures. A friend of mine trained them to smell smoke, which was very helpful in our work. But now Count Olaf is denying them food, and hitting them with his whip, and tomorrow afternoon they'll probably devour one of the freaks. The world is a harum-scarum place."

"Harum?" Sunny asked.

"It's complicated and confusing," Olivia explained. "They say that long ago it was simple and quiet, but that might be a legend. There was a schism in V.F.D.—a great big fight between many of the members—and since then it's been hard for me to know what to do. I never thought I'd be the sort of person who helps villains, but now I do. Haven't you ever found yourself doing something you never thought you'd do?"

"I guess so," Klaus said, and turned to his sisters. "Remember when we stole those keys from Hal, at the Library of Records? I never thought I'd be a thief."

"Flynn," Sunny said, which meant something like, "And I never thought I would become a violent person, but I engaged in a sword fight with Dr. Orwell."

“We’ve all done things we never thought we’d do,” Violet said, “but we always had a good reason.”

“Everybody thinks they have a good reason,” Olivia said. “Count Olaf thinks getting a fortune is a good reason to slaughter you. Esmé Squalor thinks being Olaf’s girlfriend is a good reason to join his troupe. And when I told Count Olaf where to find you, I had a good reason—because my motto is ‘give people what they want.’”

“Dubious,” Sunny said.

“Sunny’s not sure that’s a very good reason,” Violet translated, “and I must say I agree with her. You’ve caused a lot of grief, Olivia, to a lot of people, just so you could give Count Olaf what he wanted.”

Olivia nodded, and tears appeared in her eyes once more. “I know it,” she said miserably. “I’m ashamed of myself. But I don’t know what else to do.”

“You could stop helping Olaf,” Klaus said, “and help us instead. You could tell us everything you know about V.F.D. And you could take us to the Mortmain Mountains to see if one of our parents is really alive.”

“I don’t know,” Olivia said. “I’ve behaved so badly for so long, but maybe I could change.” She stood up straight, and looked sadly around the darkening tent. “I used to be a noble person,” she said. “Do you think I could be noble again?”

“I don’t know,” Klaus said, “but let’s find out. We could leave together, right now, and head north.”

“But how?” Olivia asked. “We don’t have a car, or a minivan, or four horses, or a large slingshot, or any other way to get out of the hinterlands.”

Violet retied the ribbon in her hair, and looked up at the ceiling in thought. “Olivia,” she said finally, “do the carts on that roller coaster still work?”

“The carts?” Olivia repeated. “Sort of. The wheels move, but there’s a small engine in each cart, and I think the engines have rusted away.”

“I think I could rebuild an engine using your lightning device,” Violet said. “After all, that piece of rubber is a bit like—”

“A fan belt!” Olivia finished. “That’s a good idea, Violet.”

“I’ll sneak out to the roller coaster tonight,” Violet said, “and get to work. We’ll leave in the morning, before anyone gets up.”

“Better not do it tonight,” Olivia said. “Count Olaf or his henchmen are always lurking around at night. It’d be better to leave in the afternoon, when everyone is at the House of Freaks. You can put the invention together first thing in the morning, when Olaf will be in here asking the crystal ball about you.”

“What will you do then?” Klaus asked.

“I have a spare crystal ball,” Olivia answered. “That isn’t the first one that’s been broken.”

“That’s not what I mean,” Klaus said. “I mean, you won’t tell Count Olaf that we’re here at the carnival, will you?”

Olivia paused for a moment, and shook her head. “No,” she said, but she did not sound very sure.

“Promise?” Sunny asked.

Olivia looked down at the youngest Baudelaire for a long time without answering. “Yes,” she finally said, in a very quiet voice. “I promise, if you promise to take me with you to find V.F.D.”

“We promise,” Violet said, and her siblings nodded in agreement. “Now, let’s start at the beginning. What does V.F.D. stand for?”

“Madame Lulu!” called a scratchy voice from outside the tent. The Baudelaires looked at one another in dismay as Count Olaf called the fake name of the woman beside them. “Madame Lulu! Where are you?”

“I am in fortune-telling tent, my Olaf,” Olivia replied, slipping into her accent as easily as the Baudelaires could slip into the ruffled shirt. “But do not come in, please. I am doing secret ritual with crystal ball of mine.”

“Well, hurry up,” Olaf said grumpily. “The pit is done, and I’m very thirsty. Come pour us all some wine.”

“Just one minute, my Olaf,” Olivia said, reaching down to grab the material for her turban. “Why don’t you be taking of a shower, please? You must be sweaty from the pit digging, and when you are done we will all be having of the wine together.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Count Olaf replied. “I took a shower ten days ago. I’ll go put on some extra cologne and meet you in your caravan.”

“Yes, my Olaf,” Olivia called, and then turned to whisper to the children as she wound the turban around her hair. “We’d better cut short our conversation,” she said. “The others will be looking for you. When we leave here tomorrow, I’ll tell you everything you want to know.”

“Couldn’t you just tell us a few things now?” Klaus asked. The Baudelaires had never been closer to the answers they were seeking, and delaying things any further was almost more than they could stand.

“No, no,” Olivia decided. “Here, I’d better help you get back into your disguises or you’ll get caught.”

The three children looked at one another reluctantly. “I guess you’re right,” Violet said finally. “The others will be looking for us.”

“Proffco,” Sunny said, which meant “I guess so,” and began to wind the beard around her. Violet and Klaus stepped into the fur-cuffed pants, and buttoned the shirt around them, while Olivia tied her necklace back together so she could become Madame Lulu once more.

"Our scars," Klaus remembered, looking at his sister's face. "We rubbed them off."

"And our hair needs repowdering," Violet said.

"I have a makeup pencil, please," Olivia said, reaching into the trunk, "and also the powder of talcum."

"You don't have to use your accent right now," Violet said, taking the ribbon out of her hair.

"Is good to practice, please," Olivia replied. "I must be thinking of myself as Madame Lulu, otherwise I will please be forgetting of the disguise."

"But you'll remember our promises, won't you?" Klaus asked.

"Promises?" Madame Lulu repeated.

"You promised you wouldn't tell Count Olaf that we're here," Violet said, "and we promised to take you with us to the Mortmain Mountains."

"Of course, Beverly," Madame Lulu replied. "I will be keeping of the promise to freaks."

"I'm not Beverly," Violet said, "and I'm not a freak."

Madame Lulu smiled, and leaned in to pencil a scar on the eldest Baudelaire's face. "But it is time for disguises, please," she said. "Don't be forgetting of your disguised voices, or you will be recognized."

"We won't forget our disguises," Klaus said, putting his glasses back in his pocket, "and you won't forget your promise, right?"

"Of course, please," Madame Lulu said, leading the children out of the fortune-telling tent. "Do not be of the worrying, please."

The siblings stepped out of the tent with Madame Lulu, and found themselves bathed in the blue light of the famous hinterlands sunset. The light made each of them look a bit different, as if they were wearing another blue disguise on top of their carnival disguises. The powder in Violet’s hair made her head look a pale, strange color, Klaus’s fake scars looked darker and more sinister in the shadows, and Sunny looked like a small blue cloud, with small sparks of light where her teeth reflected the last of the sun. And Madame Lulu looked more like a fortune-teller, as the sunset glistened on the jewel in her turban, and shone on her long robe in an eerie light that looked almost magical.

“Good night, my freaky ones,” she said, and the Baudelaires looked at this mysterious woman and wondered if she had really changed her motto, and would become a noble person once more. “I will be keeping of the promise,” Madame Lulu said, but the Baudelaire orphans did not know if she was speaking the truth, or just telling them what they wanted to hear.

CHAPTER
Eight

By the time the Baudelaire orphans found their way back to the freaks' caravan, Hugo, Colette, and Kevin were waiting for them. Colette and Kevin were just finishing a game of dominoes, and Hugo had cooked up a pot of tom ka gai, which is a delicious soup commonly eaten in Thailand. But as the Baudelaires sat at the table and ate their supper, they were not in the mood to digest the mixture of chicken, vegetables, fancy mushrooms, fresh ginger, coconut milk, and water chestnuts that the hunchback had prepared. They were more concerned with digesting information, a phrase which here means "thinking about everything that Madame Lulu had told them." Violet took a spoonful of hot broth, but she was thinking so hard about Lulu's archival library that she scarcely noticed the unusual, sweet taste. Klaus chewed on a water chestnut, but he was wondering so much about the headquarters in the Mortmain Mountains that he didn't appreciate its appealing, crunchy texture. And Sunny tipped the bowl forward to take a large sip, but she was so curious about the disguise kit that she wasn't aware that her beard was getting soaked. Each of the three children finished their soup to the last drop, but they were so eager to hear more from Lulu about the mystery of V.F.D. that they felt hungrier than when they sat down.

“Everyone sure is quiet tonight,” Colette said, contorting her head underneath her armpit to look around the table. “Hugo and Kevin, you haven’t talked much, and I don’t think I’ve heard a single growl from Chabo, or heard a word out of either of your heads.”

“I guess we’re not feeling much like making conversation,” Violet said, remembering to speak as low as she could. “We have a lot to think about.”

“We sure do,” Hugo said. “I’m still not wild about the idea of being eaten by a lion.”

“Me neither,” Colette said, “but today’s visitors were certainly excited about the carnival’s new attraction. Everyone does seem to love violence.”

“And sloppy eating,” Hugo said, dabbing at his mouth with a napkin. “It’s certainly an interesting dilemma.”

“I don’t think it’s an interesting dilemma,” Klaus said, squinting at his coworkers. “I think it’s a terrible one. Tomorrow afternoon, someone will jump to their deaths.” He did not add that the Baudelaires planned to be far away from Caligari Carnival by then, heading out to the Mortmain Mountains in the invention Violet planned to construct early tomorrow morning.

“I don’t know what we can do about it,” Kevin said. “On one hand, I’d rather keep on performing at the House of Freaks instead of being fed to the lions. But on the other hand—and in my case, both my hands are equally strong—Madame Lulu’s motto is ‘give people what they want,’ and apparently they want this carnival to be carnivorous.”

“I think it’s a terrible motto,” Violet said, and Sunny growled in agreement. “There are better things to do with your life than doing something humiliating and dangerous, just to make total strangers happy.”

“Like what?” Colette asked.

The Baudelaires looked at one another. They were afraid to reveal their plan to their coworkers, in case one of them would tell Count Olaf and ruin their escape. But they also couldn’t stand resolute, knowing that something terrible would happen just because Hugo, Colette, and Kevin felt obliged to be freaks and live up to Madame Lulu’s motto.

“You never know when you’ll find something else to do,” Violet said finally. “It could happen at any moment.”

“Do you really think so?” Hugo asked hopefully.

“Yes,” Klaus said. “You never know when opportunity will knock.”

Kevin looked up from his soup and gazed at the Baudelaires with a look of hope in his eye. “Which hand will it knock with?”

“Opportunity can knock with any hand, Kevin,” Klaus said, and at that moment there was a knock at the door.

“Open up, freaks.” The impatient voice, coming from outside the caravan, made the children jump. As I’m sure you know, when Klaus used the expression “opportunity will knock,” he meant that his coworkers might find something better to do with their time, instead of leaping into a pit of hungry lions just to give some people what they wanted. He did not mean that the girlfriend of a notorious villain would actually knock on the door and give them an idea that was possibly even worse, but I am sorry to say that it was Esmé Squalor who was knocking, her long fingernails clattering against the door. “Open up. I want to talk to you.”

“Just one moment, Ms. Squalor,” Hugo called, and walked over to the door. “Let’s all be on our best behavior,” he said to his coworkers. “It’s not often that a normal person wants to talk to us, and I think we should make the most of this opportunity.”

“We’ll be good,” Colette promised. “I won’t bend into a single strange position.”

"And I'll use only my right hand," Kevin said. "Or maybe only my left hand."

"Good idea," Hugo said, and opened the door. Esmé Squalor was leaning in the doorway with a wicked smile on her face.

"I am Esmé Gigi Geniveve Squalor," she said, which was often how she announced herself, even when everyone nearby knew who she was. She stepped inside the freaks' caravan, and the Baudelaires could see that she had dressed for the occasion, a phrase which here means "put on a specific outfit in an attempt to impress them." She was dressed in a long, white gown, so long that it passed her feet and lay around her as if she were standing in a large puddle of milk. Embroidered on the front of the gown in glittery thread were the words I LOVE FREAKS, except instead of the word "love" there was an enormous heart, a symbol sometimes used by people who have trouble figuring out the difference between words and shapes. On one of the shoulders of the gown, Esmé had tied a large brown sack, and on her head she had an odd round hat, with black thread poking out of the top, and it had a large, angry face drawn on the front of it. The children knew that such an outfit must be very in, otherwise Esmé would not be wearing it, but they couldn't imagine who in the world would admire such strange clothing.

"What a lovely outfit!" Hugo said.

"Thank you," Esmé said. She poked Colette with one of her long fingernails, and the contortionist stood up so Esmé could sit down in her chair. "As you can see from the front of my gown, I love freaks."

"You do?" Kevin said. "That's very nice of you."

"Yes, it is," Esmé agreed. "I had this dress made especially to show how much I love them. Look, there's a cushion on the shoulder, to resemble a hunchback, and my hat makes me look as if I have two heads, like Beverly and Elliot."

"You certainly look very freakish," Colette said.

Esmé frowned, as if this wasn't quite what she wanted to hear. "Of course, I'm not really a freak," she said. "I'm a normal person, but I wanted to show you all how much I admire you. Now, please bring me a carton of buttermilk. It's very in."

"We don't have any," Hugo said, "but I think we have some cranberry juice, or I could make you some hot chocolate. Chabo here taught me to add cinnamon to the hot chocolate, and it tastes quite delicious."

"Tom ka gai!" Sunny said.

"And we also have soup," Hugo said.

Esmé looked down at Sunny and frowned. "No, thank you," she said, "although it's very kind of you to offer. In fact, you freaks are so kind that I consider you to be more than employees at a carnival I happen to be visiting. I consider you to be some of my closest friends."

The children knew, of course, that this ridiculous statement was as fake as Esmé's second head, but their coworkers were thrilled. Hugo gave Esmé a big smile, and stood up straight so that you could barely see his hunchback. Kevin blushed and looked down at his hands. And Colette was so excited that before she could stop herself, she twisted her body until it resembled the letter K and the letter S at the same time.

"Oh, Esmé," Colette said. "Do you really mean it?"

"Of course I mean it," Esmé said, pointing to the front of her gown. "I would rather be here with you than with the finest people in the world."

"Gosh," Kevin said. "No normal person has ever called me a friend."

"Well, that's what you are," Esmé said, and leaned toward Kevin to kiss him on the nose. "You're all my freaky friends. And it makes me very sad to think that one of you will be eaten by lions tomorrow." The Baudelaires watched as she reached into a pocket in the gown and drew out a white handkerchief, embroidered with the same slogan as her gown, and held up the word “freaks” to dab at her eyes. “I have real tears in my eyes from thinking about it,” she explained.

“There, there, close friend,” Kevin said, and patted one of her hands. “Don’t be sad.”

“I can’t help it,” Esmé said, yanking back her own hand as if she were afraid that being ambidextrous was contagious. “But I have an opportunity for you that might make all of us very, very happy.”

“An opportunity?” Hugo asked. “Why, Beverly and Elliot were just telling us that an opportunity could come along at any minute.”

“And they were right,” Esmé said. “Tonight I am offering you the opportunity to quit your jobs at the House of Freaks, and join Count Olaf and myself in his troupe.”

“What would we do exactly?” Hugo asked.

Esmé smiled, and began to accentuate the positive aspects of working with Count Olaf, a phrase which here means “make the opportunity sound better than it really was, by emphasizing the good parts and scarcely mentioning the bad.” “It’s a theatrical troupe,” she said, “so you’d be wearing costumes and doing dramatic exercises, and occasionally committing crimes.”

“Dramatic exercises!” Kevin exclaimed, clasping both hands to his heart. “It’s always been my heart’s desire to perform on a stage!”

“And I’ve always wanted to wear a costume!” Hugo said.

“But you do perform on a stage,” Violet said, “and you wear an ill-fitting costume every day at the House of Freaks.”

“If you joined, you’d get to travel with us to exciting places,” Esmé continued, glaring at Violet. “Members of Count Olaf’s troupe have seen the trees of Finite Forest, and the shores of Lake Lachrymose, and the crows of the Village of Fowl Devotees, although they always have to sit in the back seat. And, best of all, you'd get to work for Count Olaf, one of the most brilliant and handsome men who ever walked the face of the earth."

"Do you really think that a normal man like him would want to work with freaks like us?" Colette asked.

"Of course he would," Esmé said. "Count Olaf doesn't care whether you have something wrong with you or if you're normal, as long as you're willing to carry out his orders. I think you'll find that working in Olaf's troupe is a job where people won't think you're freakish at all. And you'll be paid a fortune—at least, Count Olaf will be."

"Wow!" Hugo said. "What an opportunity!"

"I had a hunch you'd be excited about it," Esmé said. "No offense, Hugo. Now, if you're interested in joining, there's just one thing you need to do."

"A job interview?" Colette asked nervously.

"There's no need for close friends of mine to do anything as unpleasant as a job interview," Esmé said. "You just have to do one simple task. Tomorrow afternoon, during the show with the lions, Count Olaf will announce which freak will jump into the pit of lions. But I want whomever is chosen to throw Madame Lulu in instead."

The freaks' caravan was silent for a moment as everyone digested this information. "You mean," Hugo said finally, "that you want us to murder Madame Lulu?"

"Don't think of it as murder," Esmé said. "Think of it as a dramatic exercise. It's a special surprise for Count Olaf that will prove to him that you're brave enough to join his troupe."

"Throwing Lulu into a pit of lions doesn't strike me as particularly brave," Colette said. "Just cruel and vicious."

"How can it be cruel and vicious to give people what they want?" Esmé asked. "You want to join Count Olaf's troupe, the crowd wants to see someone eaten by lions, and I want Madame Lulu thrown into the pit. Tomorrow, one of you will have the exciting opportunity to give everybody exactly what they want."

"Grr," Sunny growled, but only her siblings understood that she really meant "Everybody except Lulu."

"When you put it like that," Hugo said thoughtfully, "it doesn't sound so bad."

"Of course it doesn't," Esmé said, adjusting her false head. "Besides, Madame Lulu was eager to see all of you eaten by lions, so you should be happy to throw her in the pit."

"But why do you want Madame Lulu thrown in?" Colette asked.

Esmé scowled. "Count Olaf thinks we have to make this carnival popular, so that Madame Lulu will help us with her crystal ball," she said, "but I don't think we need her help. Besides, I'm tired of my boyfriend buying her presents."

"That doesn't seem like such a good reason for someone to be eaten by lions," Violet said carefully, in her disguised voice.

"I'm not surprised that a two-headed person like yourself is a little confused," Esmé said, and reached out her long-nailed hands to pat both Violet and Klaus on their scarred faces. "Once you join Olaf's troupe, you won't be troubled by that kind of freakish thinking any longer."

"Just think," Hugo said, "tomorrow we'll stop being freaks, and we'll be henchmen of Count Olaf."

"I prefer the term henchpeople," Colette said.

Esmé gave everyone in the room a big smile, and then reached up to her shoulder and opened the brown sack. "To celebrate your new jobs," she said, “I brought each of you a present.”

“A present!” Kevin cried. “Madame Lulu never gave us presents.”

“This is for you, Hugo,” Esmé said, and took out an oversized coat the Baudelaires recognized from a time when the hook-handed man had disguised himself as a doorman. The coat was so big that it had covered his hooks, and as Hugo tried it on, they saw that it was also big enough to fit Hugo, even with his irregular shape. Hugo looked at himself in the mirror and then at his coworkers in joy.

“It covers my hunchback!” he said happily. “I look normal, instead of freakish!”

“You see?” Esmé said. “Count Olaf is already making your life much better. And look what I have for you, Colette.” The Baudelaires watched as Olaf’s girlfriend reached into the sack and pulled out the long, black robe that they had seen in the trunk of the automobile. “It’s so baggy,” Esmé explained, “that you can twist your body any which way, and no one will notice that you’re a contortionist.”

“It’s like a dream come true!” Colette said, grabbing it out of Esmé’s hands. “I’d throw a hundred people into the lion pit to wear something like this.”

“And Kevin,” Esmé said, “look at this small piece of rope. Turn around, and I’ll tie your right hand behind your back so you can’t possibly use it.”

“And then I’ll be left-handed, like normal people!” Kevin said, jumping out of his chair and standing on his two equally strong feet. “Hooray!”

The ambidextrous person turned around happily so Esmé could tie his right hand behind his back, and in a moment he became someone with only one useful arm instead of two.

“I haven’t forgotten you two,” Esmé continued, smiling at the three of them. “Chabo, here’s a long razor that Count Olaf uses when he needs to disguise himself with a good shave. I thought you could use it to trim some of that ugly wolf hair. And for you, Beverly and Elliot, I have this."

Esmé removed the sack from her gown and held it out to the older Baudelaires triumphantly. Violet and Klaus peeked inside and saw that it was empty. "This sack is perfect to cover up one of your heads," she explained. "You'll look like a normal one-headed person who just happens to have a sack balanced on their shoulder. Isn't that smashing?"

"I guess so," Klaus said, in his fake high voice.

"What's the matter with you?" Hugo demanded. "You've been offered an exciting job and given a generous present, and yet both your heads are moping around."

"You, too, Chabo," Colette said. "I can see through your fur that you don't look very enthusiastic."

"I think this might be an opportunity that we should refuse," Violet said, and her siblings nodded in agreement.

"What?" Esmé said sharply.

"It's nothing personal," Klaus added quickly, although not wanting to work for Count Olaf was about as personal as things could get. "It does seem very exciting to work in a theatrical troupe, and Count Olaf does seem like a terrific person."

"Then what's the problem?" Kevin asked.

"Well," Violet said, "I don't think I'm comfortable throwing Madame Lulu to the lions."

"As her other head, I agree," Klaus said, "and Chabo agrees, too."

"I bet she only half agrees," Hugo said. "I bet her wolf half can't wait to watch her get eaten."

Sunny shook her head and growled as gently as she could, and Violet lifted her up and placed her on the table. “It just doesn’t seem right,” Violet said. “Madame Lulu isn’t the nicest person I know, but I’m not sure she deserves to be devoured.”

Esmé gave the older Baudelaires a large, false smile, and leaned forward to pat them each on the head again. “Don’t worry your heads over whether or not she deserves to be devoured,” she said, and then smiled down at Chabo. “You don’t deserve to be half wolf, do you?” she asked. “People don’t always get what they deserve in this world.”

“It still seems like a wicked thing to do,” Klaus said.

“I don’t think so,” Hugo said. “It’s giving people what they want, just like Lulu says.”

“Why don’t you sleep on it?” Esmé suggested, and stood up from the table. “Right after tomorrow’s show, Count Olaf is heading north to the Mortmain Mountains to take care of something important, and if Madame Lulu is eaten by then, you’ll be allowed to join him. You can decide in the morning whether you want to be brave members of a theater troupe, or cowardly freaks in a rundown carnival.”

“I don’t need to sleep on it,” Kevin said.

“Me neither,” Colette said. “I can decide right now.”

“Yes,” Hugo agreed. “I want to join Count Olaf.”

“I’m glad to hear that,” Esmé said. “Maybe you can convince your coworkers to join you in joining me joining him.” She looked scornfully at the three children as she opened the door to the caravan. The hinterlands sunset was long over, and there was not a trace of blue light falling on the carnival. “Think about this, Beverly and Elliot, and Chabo, too,” she said. “It just might be a wicked thing, throwing Madame Lulu into a pit full of carnivorous lions.” Esmé took a step outside, and it was so dark that Olaf’s girlfriend looked like a ghost in a long, white gown and a fake extra head. “But if you don’t join us, where can you possibly go?” she asked. The

Baudelaire orphans had no answer for Esmé Squalor’s terrible question, but Esmé answered it herself, with a long, wicked laugh. “If you don’t choose the wicked thing, what in the world will you do?” she asked, and disappeared into the night.

CHAPTER
Nine

The curious thing about being told to sleep on it—a phrase which here means, as I'm sure you know, "to go to bed thinking about something and reach a conclusion in the morning"—is that you usually can't. If you are thinking over a dilemma, you are likely to toss and turn all night long, thinking over terrible things that can happen and trying to imagine what in the world you can do about it, and these circumstances are unlikely to result in any sleeping at all. Just last night, I was troubled by a decision involving an eyedropper, a greedy night watchman, and a tray of individual custards, and this morning I am so tired that I can scarcely type these worfs.

And so it was with the Baudelaire orphans that night, after Esmé Squalor had told them to sleep on it, and decide the next morning whether or not to throw Madame Lulu to the lions and join Count Olaf's troupe. The children, of course, had no intention of becoming part of a band of villains, or tossing anyone into a deadly pit. But Esmé had also asked them what in the world they would do if they decided not to join Olaf, and this was the question that kept them tossing and turning in their hammocks, which are particularly uncomfortable places to toss and turn. The Baudelaires hoped that instead of joining Count Olaf, they would travel through the hinterlands in a motorized roller-coaster cart of Violet's invention, accompanied by Madame Lulu, in her undisguised identity of Olivia, along with the archival library from underneath the table of the fortune-telling tent, in the hopes of finding one of the Baudelaire parents alive and well at the V.F.D. headquarters in the Mortmain Mountains. But this plan seemed so complicated that the children worried over all that could go wrong and spoil the whole thing. Violet thought about the lightning device that she planned to turn into a fan belt, and worried that there wouldn't be sufficient torque to make the carts move the way they needed to. Klaus worried that the archival library wouldn't contain specific directions to the headquarters, and they would get lost in the mountains, which were rumored to be enormous, confusing, and filled with wild animals. Sunny worried that they might not find enough to eat in the hinterlands. And all three Baudelaires worried that Madame Lulu would not keep her promise, and would reveal the orphans' disguise when Count Olaf asked about them the next morning. The siblings worried about these things all night, and although in my case the dessert chef managed to find my hotel room and knock on my window just before dawn, the Baudelaire orphans found that when morning came and they were done sleeping on it, they hadn't reached any other conclusion but that their plan was risky, and the only one they could think of.

As the first rays of the sun shone through the window onto the potted plants, the Baudelaires quietly lowered themselves out of their hammocks. Hugo, Colette, and Kevin had announced that they were ready to join Count Olaf's troupe and didn't need to sleep on it, and as so often happens with people who have nothing to sleep on, the children's coworkers were sleeping soundly and did not awaken as the siblings left the caravan to get to work on their plan.

Count Olaf and his troupe had dug the lions' pit alongside the ruined roller coaster, so close that the children had to walk along its edge to reach the ivy-covered carts. The pit was not very deep, although its walls were just high enough that nobody could climb out if they were thrown inside, and it was not very large, so all the lions were as crowded together as they had been in the trailer. Like the Baudelaires' coworkers, the lions must not have had much to sleep on, and they were still dozing in the morning sun. Sound asleep, the lions did not look particularly ferocious. Some of their manes were all tangled, as if no one had brushed them for a long time, and sometimes one of their legs twitched, as if they were dreaming of better days. On their backs and bellies were several nasty scars from the whippings Count Olaf had given them, which made the Baudelaires sore just looking at them, and most of the lions were very, very thin, as if they had not eaten a good meal in quite some time.

“I feel sorry for them,” Violet said, looking at one lion who was so skinny that all of its ribs were visible. “If Madame Lulu was right, these lions were once noble creatures, and now look how miserably Count Olaf has treated them.”

“They look lonely,” Klaus said, squinting down into the pit with a sad frown. “Maybe they’re orphans, too.”

“But maybe they have a surviving parent,” Violet said, “somewhere in the Mortmain Mountains.”

“Edasurc,” Sunny said, which meant something like, “Maybe someday we can rescue these lions.”

“For now, let’s rescue ourselves,” Violet said with a sigh. “Klaus, let’s see if we can untangle the ivy from this cart in front. We’ll probably need two carts, one for passengers and one for the archival library, so Sunny, see if you can get the ivy off that other one.”

“Easy,” said Sunny, pointing to her teeth.

“All the caravans are on wheels,” Klaus said. “Would it be easier to hitch up one of the caravans to the lightning device?”

“A caravan is too big,” Violet replied. “If you wanted to move a caravan, you’d have to attach it to an automobile, or several horses. We’ll be lucky if I can rebuild the carts’ engines. Madame Lulu said that they were rusted away.”

“It seems like we’re hitching our hopes to a risky plan,” Klaus said, tearing away at a few strands of ivy with the one arm he could use. “But I suppose it’s no more risky than plenty of other things we’ve done, like stealing a sailboat.”

“Or climbing up an elevator shaft,” Violet said.

“Whaque,” Sunny said, with her mouth full of plants, and her siblings knew she meant something along the lines of, “Or pretending to be surgeons.”

“Actually,” Violet said, “maybe this plan isn’t so risky after all. Look at the axles on this cart.”

“Axles?” Klaus asked.

“The rods that hold the wheels in place,” she explained, pointing to the bottom of the cart. “They’re in perfect condition. That’s good news, because we need these wheels to carry us a long way.” The eldest Baudelaire looked up from her work and gazed out at the horizon. To the east, the sun was rising, and soon its rays would reflect off the mirrors positioned in the fortune-telling tent, but to the north, she could see the Mortmain Mountains rising up in odd, square shapes, more like a staircase than a mountain range, with patches of snow on the higher places, and the top steps covered in a thick, gray fog. “It’ll take a long time to get up there,” she said, “and it doesn’t look like there are a lot of repair shops on the way.”

“I wonder what we’ll find up there,” Klaus said. “I’ve never been to the headquarters of something.”

“Neither have I,” Violet said. “Here, Klaus, lean down with me so I can look at the engine of this cart.”

“If we knew more about V.F.D.,” Klaus said, “we might know what to expect. How does the engine look?”

“Not too bad,” Violet said. “Some of these pistons are completely rusted away, but I think I can replace them with these latches on the sides of the cart, and the lightning device will provide a fan belt. But we’ll need something else—something like twine, or wire, to help connect the two carts.”

“Ivy?” Sunny asked.

“Good idea, Sunny,” Violet said. “The stems of the ivy feel solid enough. If you’ll pluck the leaves off a few strands, you’d be a big help.”

“What can I do?” Klaus asked.

“Help me turn the cart over,” Violet said, “but watch where you put your feet. We don’t want you falling into the pit.”

“I don’t want *anyone* falling into the pit,” Klaus said. “You don’t think the others will throw Madame Lulu to the lions, do you?”

“Not if we get this done in time,” Violet said grimly. “See if you can help me bend the latch so it fits into that notch, Klaus. No, no—the *other* way. I just hope Esmé doesn’t have them throw somebody else in when we all escape.”

“She probably will,” Klaus said, struggling with the latch. “I can’t understand why Hugo, Colette, and Kevin want to join up with people who do such things.”

“I guess they’re just happy that anybody’s treating them like normal people,” Violet said, and glanced into the pit. One of the lions yawned, stretched its paws, and opened one sleepy eye, but seemed uninterested in the three children working nearby. “Maybe that’s why the hook-handed man works for Count Olaf, or the bald man with the long nose. Maybe when they tried to work someplace else, everyone laughed at them.”

“Or maybe they just like committing crimes,” Klaus said.

“That’s a possibility, too,” Violet said, and then frowned at the bottom of the cart. “I wish I had Mother’s tool kit,” she said. “She had this tiny wrench I always admired, and it would be just perfect for this job.”

“She’d probably be a better help than I am,” Klaus said. “I can’t make head or tail of what you’re doing.”

“You’re doing fine,” Violet said, “particularly if you consider that we’re sharing a shirt. How are those ivy stems coming, Sunny?”

“Lesoint,” Sunny replied, which meant “I’m nearly done.”

“Good work,” Violet said, peering at the sun. “I’m not sure how much time we have. Count Olaf is probably inside the fortune-telling tent by now, asking the crystal ball about our whereabouts. I hope Madame Lulu keeps her promise, and doesn’t give him what he wants. Will you hand me that piece of metal on the ground, Klaus? It looks like it used to be part of the tracks, but I’m going to use it to make a steering device.”

“I wish Madame Lulu could give us what *we* want,” Klaus said, handing the piece to his sister. “I wish we could find out if one of our parents survived the fire, without wandering around a mountain range.”

“Me, too,” Violet said, “and even then we might not find them. They could be down here looking for us.”

“Remember the train station?” Klaus said, and Violet nodded.

“Esoobac,” Sunny asked, handing over the ivy stems. By “Esoobac,” she meant something like, “I don’t remember,” although there was no way she could have, as the youngest Baudelaire hadn’t been born at the time her siblings were remembering. The Baudelaire family had decided to go away for the weekend to a vineyard, a word which here means “a sort of farm where people grow grapes used in wine.” This vineyard was famous for having grapes that smelled delicious, and it was very pleasant to picnic in the fields, while the fragrance drifted in the air and the vineyard’s famous donkeys, who helped carry bushels of grapes at harvesttime, slept in the shade of the grapevines. To reach the vineyard, the Baudelaires had to take not one train but two, transferring at a busy station not far from Paltryville, and on the day that Violet and Klaus were remembering, the children had been separated from their parents in the rush of the transferring crowd. Violet and Klaus, who were quite young, decided to search for their parents in the row of shops just outside the station, and soon the local shoemaker, blacksmith, chimney sweep, and computer technician were all helping the two frightened children look for their mother and father. Soon enough the

Baudelaire family was reunited, but the children's father had taught them a serious lesson. "If you lose us," he said, "stay put."

"Yes," their mother agreed. "Don't go wandering around looking for us. *We'll* come and find *you*."

At the time, Violet and Klaus had solemnly agreed, but times had changed. When the Baudelaire parents had said "If you lose us," they were referring to times when the children might lose sight of them in a crowd, as they had at the train station that day, where I had lunch just a few weeks ago and talked to the shoemaker's son about what had happened. They were not referring to the way the Baudelaires had lost them now, in a deadly fire that it seemed had claimed at least one of their lives. There are times to stay put, and what you want will come to you, and there are times to go out into the world and find such a thing for yourself. Like the Baudelaire orphans, I have found myself in places where staying put would be dangerously foolish, and foolishly dangerous. I have stood in a department store, and seen something written on a price tag that told me I had to leave at once, but in different clothing. I have sat in an airport, and heard something over the loudspeaker that told me I had to leave later that day, but on a different flight. And I have stood alongside the roller coaster at Caligari Carnival, and known what the Baudelaires could not possibly have known that quiet morning. I have looked at the carts, all melted together and covered in ash, and I have gazed into the pit dug by Count Olaf and his henchmen and seen all the burnt bones lying in a heap, and I have picked through the bits of mirror and crystal where the fortune-telling tent once stood, and all this research has told me the same thing, and if somehow I could slip back in time, as easily as I could slip out of the disguise I am in now, I would walk to the edge of that pit and tell the Baudelaire orphans the results of my findings. But of course I cannot. I can only fulfill my sacred duty and type this story as best I can, down to the last worf.

"Worf," Sunny said, when the Baudelaires had finished telling her about the train station. By "worf," she meant something along the lines of, "I don't think we should stay put. I think we should leave right now."

"We can't leave yet," Violet said. "The steering device is ready, and the carts are firmly attached to one another, but without a fan belt, the engine won't work. We'd better go to the fortune-telling tent and dismantle the lightning device."

"Olaf?" Sunny asked.

"Let's hope that Madame Lulu has sent him on his way," Violet said, "otherwise we'll be cutting it close. We have to finish our invention before the show begins, otherwise everyone will see us get in the carts and leave."

There was a faint growl from the pit, and the children saw that most of the lions were awake and looking around crankily at their surroundings. Some of them were trying to pace around their cramped quarters, but they only managed to get in the way of other lions, which only made them crankier.

"Those lions look hungry," Klaus said. "I wonder if it's almost show time."

"Aklec," Sunny said, which meant "Let's move out," and the Baudelaires moved out, walking away from the roller coaster and toward the fortune-telling tent. As the children walked through the carnival, they saw that quite a few visitors had already arrived, and some of them giggled at the siblings as they made their way.

"Look!" one man said, pointing at the Baudelaires with a sneer. "Freaks! Let's be sure to go to the lion show later—one of them might get eaten."

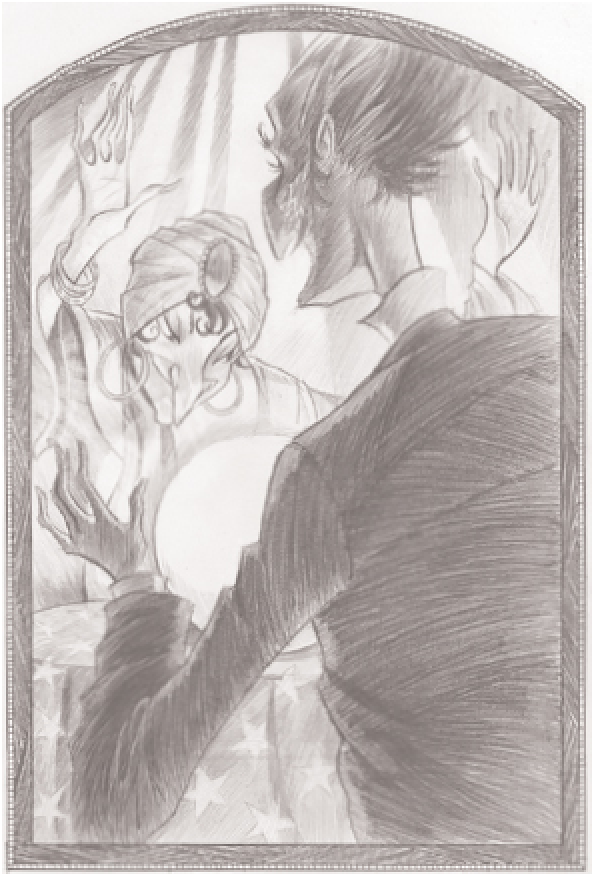
"Oh, I hope so," said his companion. "I didn't come all the way out here to the hinterlands for nothing."

"The woman at the ticket booth told me that a journalist from *The Daily Punctilio* is here to report on who gets devoured," said another man, who was wearing a CALIGARI CARNIVAL T-shirt he had apparently purchased at the gift caravan.

"*The Daily Punctilio*!" cried the woman who was with him. "How exciting! I've been reading about those Baudelaire murderers for weeks. I just love violence!”

“Who doesn’t?” the man replied. “Especially when it’s combined with sloppy eating.”

Just as the Baudelaires reached the fortune- telling tent, a man stepped in front of them and blocked their way. The children looked up at the pimples on his chin and recognized him as the very rude member of the audience at the House of Freaks.



“Why, look who’s here,” he said. “It’s Chabo the Wolf Baby, and Beverly and Elliot, the two-headed freak.”

“It’s very nice to see you again,” Violet said quickly. She tried to walk around him, but he grabbed the shirt she was sharing with her brother, and she had to stop so he wouldn’t tear the shirt and reveal their disguise.

“What about your other head?” the pimpled man asked sarcastically. “Doesn’t he think it’s nice to see me?”

“Of course,” Klaus said, “but we’re in a bit of a hurry, so if you’ll excuse us…”

“I don’t excuse freaks,” the man said. “There’s no excuse for them. Why don’t you wear a sack over one of your heads, so you look normal?”

“Grr!” Sunny said, baring her teeth at the man’s knees.

“Please leave us alone, sir,” Violet said. “Chabo is very protective of us, and might bite you if you get too close.”

“I bet Chabo’s no match for a bunch of ferocious lions,” the man said. “I can’t wait until the show, and neither can my mother.”

“That’s right, dear,” said a woman who was standing nearby. She stepped forward to give the pimpled man a big kiss, and the Baudelaires noticed that pimples seemed to run in the family. “What time does the show start, freaks?”

“The show starts right now!”

The pimpled man and his mother turned around to see who had spoken, but the Baudelaires did not have to look to know it was Count Olaf who had made the announcement. The villain was standing at the entrance to the fortune-telling tent with a whip in his hand and a particularly nasty gleam in his eye, both of which the siblings recognized. The whip, of course, was the one that Count Olaf used to encourage the lions to become ferocious, which the Baudelaires had seen the previous day, and the gleam was something they had seen more times than they could count. It was the sort of gleam someone might get in their eye when they were telling a joke, but when Olaf looked at people that way it usually meant that one of his schemes was succeeding brilliantly.

“The show starts right now!” he announced again to the people gathering around him. “I’ve just had my fortune told, so I’ve gotten what I wanted.” Count Olaf pointed at the fortune-telling tent with his whip, and then turned around to point at the disguised Baudelaires as he grinned at the crowd. “Now, ladies and gentlemen, it’s time to go to the lion pit so we can give the rest of you what you want.”

CHAPTER
Ten

"I'm going to the pit right now!" cried a woman in the crowd. "I want to have a good view of the show!"

"So do I," said a man standing next to her. "There's no point in having lions eat somebody if you can't watch it happen."

"Well, we'd better hurry," said the man with pimples on his chin. "There's quite a crowd here."

The Baudelaire orphans looked around and saw that the pimpled man was speaking the truth.

News of Caligari Carnival's latest attraction must have spread far beyond the hinterlands, because there were many more visitors than yesterday, and there seemed to be more and more arriving every minute.

"I'll lead the way to the pit," announced Count Olaf. "After all, the lion show was my idea, so I should get to walk in front."

"It was your idea?" asked a woman the children recognized from their stay at Heimlich Hospital. She was wearing a gray suit, and chewing gum as she spoke into a microphone, and the siblings remembered that she was a reporter from *The Daily Punctilio.* "I'd love to write about it in the newspaper. What is your name?"

"Count Olaf!" Count Olaf said proudly.

"I can see the headline now: 'COUNT OLAF THINKS UP IDEA FOR LION SHOW,'" said the reporter. "Wait until the readers of *The Daily Punctilio* see that!"

"Wait a minute," someone said. "I thought Count Olaf was murdered by those three children."

"That was Count Omar," replied the reporter. "I should know. I've been writing about the Baudelaires for *The Daily Punctilio.* Count Omar was murdered by those three Baudelaire children, who still remain at large."

"Well, if anyone ever finds them," someone in the crowd said, "we'll throw *them* into the lion pit."

"An excellent idea," Count Olaf replied, "but in the meantime, the lions will have a meal of one delicious freak. Follow me, everyone, for an afternoon of violence and sloppy eating!"

"Hooray!" cried several members of the crowd, as Olaf took a bow and began to lead everyone in the direction of the ruined roller coaster where the lions were waiting.

"Come with me, freaks," Count Olaf ordered, pointing at the Baudelaires. "My assistants are bringing the others. We want all you freaks assembled for the choosing ceremony."

"I will bring them, my Olaf," Madame Lulu said in her disguised accent, emerging from the fortune-telling tent. When she saw the Baudelaires, her eyes widened, and she quickly held her hands behind her back. "You lead crowd to pit, please, and give interview to newspaper on way."

“Oh, yes,” said the reporter. “I can see the headline now: ‘EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW WITH COUNT OLAF, WHO IS NOT COUNT OMAR, WHO IS DEAD.’ Wait until the readers of *The Daily Punctilio* see that!”

“It will be exciting for people to read about me,” Count Olaf said. “All right, I’ll walk with the reporter, Lulu. But hurry up with the freaks.”

“Yes, my Olaf,” Madame Lulu said. “Come with me, freaky peoples, please.”

Lulu held out her hands for the Baudelaires to take, as if she were their mother walking them across the street, instead of a fake fortune-teller leading them to a pit of lions. The children could see that one of Madame Lulu’s palms had an odd streak of dirt on it, while the other hand was closed in an odd, tight fist. The children did not want to take those hands and walk toward the lion show, but there were so many people gathered around, eagerly expecting violence, that it seemed they had no other choice. Sunny grabbed ahold of Lulu’s right hand, and Violet grabbed Lulu’s left, and they walked together in an awkward knot in the direction of the ruined roller coaster.

“Olivi—” Klaus started to say, but then looked around the crowd and realized it would be foolish to use her real name. “I mean, Madame Lulu,” he corrected himself, and then leaned across Violet to speak as quietly as he could. “Let’s walk as slowly as we can. Maybe we can find an opportunity to sneak back to the tent and dismantle the lightning device.”

Madame Lulu did not answer, but merely shook her head slightly to indicate that it was not a good time to speak of such matters.

“Fan belt,” Sunny reminded her, as quietly as she could, but Madame Lulu just shook her head.

“You kept your promise, didn’t you?” Klaus murmured, scarcely above a whisper, but Madame Lulu stared ahead as if she had not heard. He nudged his older sister inside their shared shirt. “Violet,” he said, scarcely daring to use her real name. “Ask Madame Lulu to walk more slowly.”

Violet glanced briefly at Klaus, and then turned her head to catch Sunny's eye. The younger Baudelaires looked back at their sister and watched her shake her head slightly, just as Madame Lulu had, and then look down, where she was holding the fortune-teller's hand. Between two of Violet's fingers, Klaus and Sunny could see the tip of a small piece of rubber, which they recognized immediately. It was the part of Madame Lulu's lightning device that resembled a fan belt—the very thing Violet needed to turn the carts of the roller coaster into an invention that could carry the Baudelaires out of the hinterlands and up into the Mortmain Mountains. But instead of feeling hopeful as they looked at this crucial item in Violet's hand, all three Baudelaires felt something quite a bit less pleasant.

If you have ever experienced something that feels strangely familiar, as if the exact same thing has happened to you before, then you are experiencing what the French call "déjà vu." Like most French expressions—"ennui," which is a fancy term for severe boredom, or "la petite mort," which describes a feeling that part of you has died—"déjà vu" refers to something that is usually not very pleasant, and it was not pleasant for the Baudelaire orphans to arrive at the lion pit and experience the queasy feeling of déjà vu. When the children had been staying at Heimlich Hospital, they had found themselves in an operating theater, surrounded by a large crowd that was very eager to see something violent occur, such as an operation performed on someone. When the children were living in the town of V.F.D., they had found themselves in a field, surrounded by a large crowd eager to see something violent occur, such as the burning of someone at the stake. And now, as Madame Lulu let go of their hands, the children looked at the enormous and strangely familiar crowd towering over them at the ruined roller coaster. Once again, there were people eager for something violent to happen. Once again, the Baudelaires were afraid for their lives. And once again, it was all because of Count Olaf. The siblings looked past the cheering crowd at the two roller-coaster carts that Violet had adapted. All the invention needed was the fan belt, and the children could continue their search for one of the Baudelaire parents, but as Violet, Klaus, and Sunny looked across the pit at the two small carts joined with ivy and altered to travel across the hinterlands, they felt the queasiness of déjà vu and wondered if there was another unhappy ending in store for them.

“Welcome, ladies and gentlemen, to the most exciting afternoon of your entire lives!” Count Olaf announced, and cracked his whip into the pit. The whip was just long enough to strike the restless lions, who roared obediently and gnashed their teeth in hunger. “These carnivorous lions are ready to eat a freak,” he said. “But which freak will it be?”

The crowd parted, and the hook-handed man emerged, leading the Baudelaires’ coworkers in a line toward the edge of the pit where the Baudelaires stood. Hugo, Colette, and Kevin had evidently been told to dress in their freakish clothes rather than in the gifts Esmé had given them, and they gave the Baudelaires a small smile and stared nervously at the snarling lions. Once the children’s coworkers had taken their places, Count Olaf’s other comrades emerged from the crowd. Esmé Squalor was wearing a pinstripe suit and carrying a parasol, which is a small umbrella used for keeping the sun out of one’s eyes, and she smiled at the crowd and sat down on a small chair brought by Olaf’s bald associate, who was also holding a long, flat piece of wood that he placed at the edge of the pit so it hung over the lions like a diving board over a swimming pool. Finally, the two white-faced women stepped forward, holding a small wooden box with a hole in the top.

“I’m so glad this is my last day in these clothes,” Hugo murmured to the Baudelaires, gesturing to his ill-fitting coat. “Just think—soon I’ll be a member of Count Olaf’s troupe, and I’ll never have to look like a freak again.”

“Unless you’re thrown to the lions,” Klaus couldn’t help replying.

“Are you kidding?” Hugo whispered back. “If I’m the one chosen, I’m going to throw Madame Lulu into the pit, just like Esmé said.”

“Look closely at all these freaks,” Count Olaf said, as several people in the audience tittered. “Observe Hugo’s funny back. Think about how silly it is that Colette can bend herself into all sorts of strange positions. Giggle at the absurdity of Kevin’s ambidextrous arms and legs. Snicker at Beverly and Elliot, the two-headed freak. And laugh so hard that you can scarcely breathe at Chabo the Wolf Baby.”

The crowd erupted into laughter, pointing and laughing at the people they thought were funniest.

“Look at Chabo’s ridiculous teeth!” cried a woman who had dyed her hair several colors at once. “She looks positively idiotic!”

“I think Kevin is funnier!” replied her husband, who had dyed his hair to match. “I hope he’s thrown into the pit. It’ll be fun to see him try to defend himself with both hands and feet.”

“I hope it’s the hook-handed freak!” said a woman standing in back of the Baudelaires. “That will make it even more violent!”

“I’m *not* a freak,” the hook-handed man snarled impatiently. “I’m an employee of Count Olaf’s.”

“Oh, sorry,” the woman replied. “In that case, I hope it’s that man with pimples all over his chin.”

“I’m a member of the audience!” the man cried. “I’m not a freak. I just have a few skin problems.”

“Then what about that woman in that silly suit?” she asked. “Or that guy with only one eyebrow?”

“I’m Count Olaf’s girlfriend,” Esmé said, “and my suit is in, not silly.”

“I don’t care who’s a freak and who isn’t,” said someone else in the crowd. “I just want to see the lions eat somebody.”

“You will,” Count Olaf promised. “We’re going to have the choosing ceremony right now. The names of all the freaks have been written down on small scraps of paper and placed in the box that these two lovely ladies are holding.”

The two white-faced women held up the wooden box and curtsied to the audience, while Esmé frowned at them. “I don’t think they’re particularly lovely,” she said, but few people heard her over the cheering of the crowd.

"I'm going to reach inside the box," Count Olaf said, "draw out one piece of paper, and read the name of the freak out loud. Then that freak will walk down that wooden plank and jump into the pit, and we'll all watch as the lions eat him."

"Or her," Esmé said. She looked over at Madame Lulu, and then at the Baudelaires and their coworkers. Putting down her parasol for a moment, she raised both of her long-nailed hands and made a small, pushing motion to remind them of her scheme.

"Or her," Count Olaf said, looking curiously at Esmé's gesture. "Now, are there any questions before we begin?"

"Why do you get to choose the name?" asked the pimpled man.

"Because this whole thing was my idea," Count Olaf said.

"I have a question," asked the woman with dyed hair. "Is this legal?"

"Oh, stop spoiling the fun," her husband said. "You wanted to come and watch people get eaten by lions, and so I brought you. If you're going to ask a bunch of complicated questions you can go wait in the car."

"Please continue, Your Countship," said the reporter from *The Daily Punctilio.*

"I will," Count Olaf said, and whipped the lions one more time before reaching into the wooden box. Giving the children and their coworkers a cruel smile, he moved his hand around inside the box for quite some time before at last drawing out a small piece of paper that had been folded many times. The crowd leaned forward to watch, and the Baudelaires strained to see over the heads of the adults around them. But Count Olaf did not unfold the piece of paper immediately. Instead he held it up as high as he could and gave the audience a large smile.

"I'm going to open the piece of paper very slowly," he announced, "to increase the suspense."

“How clever!” the reporter said, snapping her gum in excitement. “I can see the headline now: ‘COUNT OLAF INCREASES SUSPENSE.’”

“I learned how to amaze crowds by working extensively as a famous actor,” Count Olaf said, smiling at the reporter and still holding up the piece of paper. “Be sure to write that down.”

“I will,” the reporter said breathlessly, and held her microphone closer to Olaf’s mouth.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” Count Olaf cried. “I am now unfolding the first fold in the piece of paper!”

“Oh boy!” cried several members of the audience. “Hooray for the first fold!”

“There are only five folds left,” Olaf said. “Only five more folds, and we’ll know which freak will be thrown to the lions.”

“This is so exciting!” cried the man with dyed hair. “I might faint!”

“Just don’t faint into the pit,” his wife said.

“I am now unfolding the second fold in the piece of paper!” Count Olaf announced. “Now there are only four folds left!”

The lions roared impatiently, as if they were tired of all this nonsense with the piece of paper, but the audience cheered for the increased suspense and paid no attention to the beasts in the pit, gazing only at Count Olaf, who smiled and blew kisses to the carnival visitors. The Baudelaires, however, were no longer looking over the heads of the crowd to watch Olaf do his shtick, a phrase which here means “increase suspense by slowly unfolding a piece of paper printed with the name of someone who was supposed to jump into a pit of lions.” They were taking advantage of the fact that no one was watching them, and stepped as close as they could to one another so they could talk without being overheard.

“Do you think we could sneak around the pit to the roller-coaster carts?” Klaus murmured to his sister.

“I think it’s too crowded,” Violet replied. “Do you think we could get the lions not to eat anyone?”

“I think they’re too hungry,” Klaus said, squinting down at the growling beasts. “I read a book about large feline animals that said if they’re hungry enough, they’ll eat practically anything.”

“Is there anything else you’ve read about lions that can help us?” Violet asked.

“I don’t think so,” Klaus replied. “Is there anything else you can invent from that fan belt that can help us?”

“I don’t think so,” Violet replied, her voice faint with fear.

“Déjà vu!” Sunny called up to her siblings. She meant something along the lines of, “We must be able to think of something that can help us. We’ve escaped from bloodthirsty crowds before.”

“Sunny’s right,” Klaus said. “When we lived at Heimlich Hospital, we learned about stalling a crowd, when we postponed Olaf’s scheme to operate on you.”

“And when we lived at the Village of Fowl Devotees,” Violet said, “we learned about mob psychology, when we watched all the villagers get so upset that they couldn’t think clearly. But what can we do with this crowd? What can we do now?”

“Both!” Sunny murmured, and then growled quickly in case anybody was listening.

“I unfolded the paper again!” Count Olaf crowed, and I probably do not have to tell you that he explained that there were only three folds left, or that the crowd cheered him once more, as if he had done something very brave or very noble. I probably do not have to tell you that he announced the remaining three folds as if they were very exciting events, and that the crowd cheered him each time, eagerly awaiting the violence and sloppy eating that would follow, and I probably don’t even have to tell you what was written on the piece of paper, because if you have read this far in this wretched book then you are well acquainted with the Baudelaire orphans and you know what kind of freakish luck they have. A person with normal luck would arrive at a carnival in comfortable circumstances, such as in a double-decker bus or on the back of an elephant, and would probably have a pleasant time enjoying all of the things a carnival has to offer, and would feel happy and content at the end of their stay. But the Baudelaires had arrived at Caligari Carnival in the trunk of an automobile, and had been forced to put themselves in uncomfortable disguises, take part in a humiliating show, and place themselves in dangerous circumstances, and, as their freakish luck would have it, had not even found the information they were hoping to discover. So it probably will not be a surprise to you to learn that Hugo’s name was not printed on the piece of paper in Count Olaf’s hand, or Colette’s name, or the name of Kevin, who was clasping his equally skilled hands together in nervousness as Olaf finally unfolded the paper completely. It will not surprise you that when Count Olaf announced what the paper said, the eyes of the entire crowd fell on the disguised children. But although you might not be surprised at Count Olaf’s announcement, you might be surprised at the announcement that one of the siblings made immediately afterward.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” Count Olaf announced, “Beverly and Elliot, the two-headed freak, will be thrown to the lions today.”

“Ladies and gentlemen,” Violet Baudelaire announced, “we are thrilled to be chosen.”

CHAPTER
Eleven

There is another writer I know, who, like myself, is thought by a great deal of people to be dead. His name is William Shakespeare, and he has written four kinds of plays: comedies, romances, histories, and tragedies. Comedies, of course, are stories in which people tell jokes and trip over things, and romances are stories in which people fall in love and probably get married. Histories are retellings of things that actually happened, like my history of the Baudelaire orphans, and tragedies are stories that usually begin fairly happily and then steadily go downhill, until all of the characters are dead, wounded, or otherwise inconvenienced. It is usually not much fun to watch a tragedy, whether you are in the audience or one of the characters, and out of all Shakespeare's tragedies possibly the least fun example is *King Lear*, which tells the story of a king who goes mad while his daughters plot to murder one another and other people who are getting on their nerves. Toward the end of the play, one of William Shakespeare's characters remarks that "Humanity must perforce prey upon itself, like monsters of the deep," a sentence which here means "How sad it is that people end up hurting one another as if they were ferocious sea monsters," and when the character utters those unhappy words, the people in Shakespeare's audience often weep, or sigh, or remind themselves to see a comedy next time.

I am sorry to report that the story of the Baudelaire orphans has reached a point where it is appropriate to borrow Mr. Shakespeare's rather depressing sentence to describe how the Baudelaire orphans felt as they addressed the crowd gathered at the edge of the lion pit and tried to continue the story they found themselves in without turning it into a tragedy, when it seemed that everyone was eager to hurt one another. Count Olaf and his henchmen were eager to see Violet and Klaus jump to their carnivorous deaths, so that Caligari Carnival would become more popular, and Madame Lulu would continue telling Olaf's fortune. Esmé Squalor was eager to see Madame Lulu thrown into the pit, so that she could get all of Olaf's attention, and the Baudelaires' coworkers were eager to help, so they could join Olaf's troupe. The reporter from *The Daily Punctilio* and the other members of the audience were eager to see violence and sloppy eating, so their visit to the carnival would be worthwhile, and the lions were eager for a meal, after being whipped and denied food for so long. It seemed that every member of humanity gathered at the roller coaster that afternoon was eager for something awful to occur, and the children felt awful as Violet and Klaus stepped toward the plank and pretended they were just as eager.

"Thank you, Count Olaf, for choosing my other head and I as the first victims in the lion show," Klaus said grandly in his high-pitched voice.

"Um, you're welcome," Count Olaf replied, looking a bit surprised. "Now, jump into the pit so we can watch the lions devour you."

"And do it quickly!" cried the man with pimples on his chin. "I'd like my carnival visit to be worthwhile!"

"Instead of watching a freak jump into the pit," Violet said, thinking quickly, "wouldn't you rather watch someone push a freak into the pit? That would be much more violent."

"Grr!" Sunny growled, in disguised agreement.

"That's a good point," one of the white-faced women said thoughtfully.

"Oh yes!" cried the woman with dyed hair. "I want to see the two-headed freak thrown to the lions!"

“I agree,” Esmé said, glaring at the two older Baudelaires and then at Madame Lulu. “I’d like to see someone thrown into the pit.”

The crowd cheered and applauded, and Sunny watched as her two siblings took a step toward the plank that hung over the pit where the lions were waiting hungrily. There are tiresome people who say that if you ever find yourself in a difficult situation, you should stop and figure out the right thing to do, but the three siblings already knew that the right thing to do was to dash over to the roller-coaster carts, hook up the fan belt, and escape into the hinterlands with Madame Lulu and her archival library, after calmly explaining to the gathered crowd that bloodshed was not a proper form of entertainment and that Count Olaf and his troupe ought to be arrested that very instant. But there are times in this harum-scarum world when figuring out the right thing to do is quite simple, but doing the right thing is simply impossible, and then you must do something else. The three Baudelaires, standing in their disguises in the midst of a crowd eager for violence and sloppy eating, knew that they could not do the right thing, but they thought they could try to get the crowd as frantic as possible, so that they might slip away in the confusion. Violet, Klaus, and Sunny weren’t sure if using the techniques of stalling and mob psychology was the right thing to do, but the Baudelaire orphans could not think of anything else, and whether or not it was the right thing to do, their plan did seem to be working.

“This is absolutely thrilling!” exclaimed the reporter excitedly. “I can see the headline now: ‘FREAKS PUSHED INTO LION PIT!’ Wait until the readers of *The Daily Punctilio* see that!”

Sunny made the loudest growl she could, and pointed one of her tiny fingers at Count Olaf. “What Chabo is trying to convey in her half-wolf language,” Klaus said, “is that Count Olaf ought to be the one to push us into the pit. After all, the lion show was his idea.”

“That’s true!” the pimpled man said. “Let’s see Olaf throw Beverly and Elliot into the pit!”

Count Olaf scowled at the Baudelaires, and then gave the crowd a smile that showed quite a few of his filthy teeth. “I am deeply honored to be asked," he said, bowing slightly, "but I'm afraid it would not be appropriate at this time."

"Why not?" demanded the woman with dyed hair.

Count Olaf paused for a moment, and then made a short, high-pitched sound as disguised as Sunny's growl. "I'm allergic to cats," he explained. "You see? I'm sneezing already, and I'm not even on the plank."

"Your allergies didn't bother you when you were whipping the lions," Violet said.

"That's true," the hook-handed man said. "I didn't even know you had allergies, Olaf."

Count Olaf glared at his henchman. "Ladies and gentlemen," he began, but the crowd didn't want to hear another one of the villain's speeches.

"Push the freak in, Olaf!" someone shouted, and everyone cheered. Count Olaf frowned, but grabbed Klaus's hand and led the two eldest Baudelaires onto the plank. But as the crowd roared around them and the lions roared beneath them, the Baudelaires could see that Count Olaf was no more eager to get any closer to the hungry lions than they were.

"Throwing people into pits isn't really my job," Count Olaf said nervously to the crowd. "I'm more of an actor."

"I have an idea," Esmé said suddenly, in a false sweet voice, "Madame Lulu, why don't you walk down that plank and throw your freak to its death?"

"This is not really my job either, please," Madame Lulu protested, looking at the children nervously. "I am fortune-teller, not freak-thrower."

"Don't be so modest, Madame Lulu," Count Olaf said with a nasty smile. "Even though the lion show was my idea, you're the most important person here at the carnival. Take my place on the plank, so we can see someone get pushed to their death."

"What a nice offer!" the reporter cried. "You're a very generous person, Count Olaf!"

"Let's see Madame Lulu throw Beverly and Elliot into the pit!" cried the pimpled man, and everyone cheered again. As mob psychology began to take hold, the crowd seemed to be as flexible as it was excited, and they gave the fortune-teller an enormous round of applause as she nervously took Count Olaf's place on the plank. The piece of wood teetered for a moment from the weight of so many people standing on it, and the older Baudelaires had to struggle to keep their balance. The crowd gasped in excitement, and then groaned as the two disguised children managed not to fall.

"This is so exciting!" squealed the reporter. "Maybe Lulu will fall in, too!"

"Yes," Esmé snarled. "Maybe she will."

"I don't care who falls in!" announced the pimpled man. Frustrated by the delay in violence and sloppy eating, he tossed his cold beverage into the pit and splashed several lions, who roared in annoyance. "To me, a woman in a turban is just as freaky as a two-headed person. I'm not prejudiced!"

"Me neither!" agreed someone who was wearing a hat with the words CALIGARI CARNIVAL printed on it. "I'm just eager for this show to finally get started! I hope Madame Lulu is brave enough to push that freak in!"

"It doesn't matter if she's brave enough," the bald man replied with a chuckle. "Everyone will do what they're expected to do. What other choice do they have?"

Violet and Klaus had reached the end of the plank, and they tried as hard as they could to think of an answer to the bald man's question. Below them was a roaring mass of hungry lions, who had gathered so closely together below the wooden board that they just seemed to be a mass of waving claws and open mouths, and around them was a roaring crowd of people who were watching them with eager smiles on their faces. The Baudelaires had succeeded in getting the crowd more and more frantic, but they still hadn't found an opportunity to slip away in the confusion, and now it seemed like that opportunity would never knock. With difficulty, Violet turned her head to face her brother, and Klaus squinted back at her, and Sunny could see that her siblings' eyes were filled with tears.

"Our luck may have run out," she said.

"Stop whispering to your heads!" Count Olaf ordered in a terrible voice. "Madame Lulu, push them in this instant"

"We're increasing the suspense!" Klaus cried back desperately.

"The suspense has been increased enough," replied the man with the pimpled chin impatiently. "I'm getting tired of all this stalling!"

"Me, too!" cried the woman with dyed hair.

"Me, too!" cried someone else standing nearby. "Olaf, hit Lulu with the whip! That'll get her to stop stalling!"

"Just one moment, please," Madame Lulu said, and took another step toward Violet and Klaus. The plank teetered again, and the lions roared, hoping that their lunch was about to arrive. Madame Lulu looked at the elder Baudelaires frantically and the children saw her shoulders shrug slightly underneath her shimmering robe.

"Enough of this!" the hook-handed man said, and stepped forward impatiently. "I'll throw them in myself. I guess I'm the only person here brave enough to do it!"

"Oh, no," Hugo said. "I'm brave enough, too, and so are Colette and Kevin."

"Freaks who are brave?" the hook-handed man sneered. "Don't be ridiculous!"

"We *are* brave," Hugo insisted. "Count Olaf, let us prove it to you, and then you can employ us!"

“Employ you?” Count Olaf asked with a frown.

“What a wonderful idea!” Esmé exclaimed, as if the idea had not been hers.

“Yes,” Colette said. “We’d like to find something else to do, and this seems like a wonderful opportunity.”

Kevin stepped forward and held out both his hands. “I know I’m a freak,” he said to Olaf, “but I think I could be just as useful as the hook-handed man, or your bald associate.”

“What?” the bald man snapped. “A freak like you, as useful as me? Don’t be ridiculous!”

“I can be useful,” Kevin insisted. “You just watch.”

“Stop all this bickering!” the pimpled man said crankily. “I didn’t visit this carnival to hear people argue about their work problems.”

“You’re distracting me and my other head,” Violet said in her low, disguised voice. “Let’s get off this plank and we can all discuss this matter calmly.”

“I don’t want to discuss things calmly!” cried the woman with dyed hair. “I can do that at home!”

“Yes!” agreed the reporter from *The Daily Punctilio.* “‘PEOPLE DISCUSS THINGS CALMLY’ is a boring headline! Somebody throw somebody else into the lion pit, and we’ll all get what we want!”

“Madame Lulu will do it, please!” Madame Lulu announced in a booming voice, and grabbed Violet and Klaus by the shirt. The Baudelaires looked up at her and saw a tear appear in one of her eyes, and she leaned down to speak to them. “I’m sorry, Baudelaires,” she murmured quietly, without a trace of accent, and reached down to Violet’s hand and took the fan belt away from her.

Sunny was so upset that she forgot to growl. “Trenceth!” she shrieked, which meant something along the lines of, “You ought to be ashamed of yourself!” but if the fake fortune-teller was ashamed of herself she did not behave accordingly. “Madame Lulu always says you must always give people what they want,” she said grandly in her disguised voice. “She will do the throwing, please, and she will do it now!”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Hugo said, stepping forward eagerly. “I’ll do it!”

“You’re the one being ridiculous!” Colette said, contorting her body toward Lulu. “I’ll do it!”

“No, I’ll do it!” Kevin cried. “With both hands!”

“*I’ll* do it!” the bald man cried, blocking Kevin’s way. “I don’t want a freak like you for a coworker!”

“I’ll do it!” cried the hook-handed man.

“I’ll do it!” cried one of the white-faced women.

“I’ll do it!” cried the other one.

“I’ll get someone else to do it!” cried Esmé Squalor.

Count Olaf unwound his whip and flicked it over the heads of the crowd with a mighty *snap!* that made everyone cower, a word which here means “cringe and duck and hope not to get whipped.” *“Silence!”* he commanded in a terrible roar. “All of you ought to be ashamed of yourselves. You’re arguing like a bunch of children! I want to see those lions devouring someone this very instant, and whoever has the courage to carry out my orders will get a special reward!”

This speech, of course, was just the latest example of Count Olaf’s tedious philosophy concerning a stubborn mule moving in the proper direction if there is a carrot dangling in front of it, but the offer of a special reward finally got the crowd as frantic as possible. In a moment, the crowd of carnival visitors had become a mob of volunteers, all of whom swarmed eagerly forward to finally throw someone to the lions. Hugo lunged forward to push Madame Lulu, but bumped into the box that the white-faced women were holding, and the three of them fell in a heap at the edge of the pit. The hook-handed man lunged forward to grab Violet and Klaus, but his hook caught in the cord of the reporter's microphone and became hopelessly entangled. Colette contorted her arms so as to grab Lulu's ankles, but grabbed Esmé Squalor's ankle by accident, and got her hands all twisted around one of Esmé's fashionable shoes. The woman with dyed hair decided she might give it a try, and leaned forward to push the elder Baudelaires, but they stepped to the side and the woman fell into her husband, who accidentally slapped the man with pimples on his chin, and the three carnival visitors began arguing loudly. Quite a few people who were standing nearby decided to get in on the argument, and gathered around to shout in each other's faces. Within moments of Count Olaf's announcement, the Baudelaires were in the middle of a furious mass of humanity, who were standing over the children, yelling and pushing and preying on themselves like monsters of the deep, while the lions roared furiously in the pit below.

But then the siblings heard another sound in the pit, a horrible crunching and ripping sound that was far worse than the roaring of beasts. The crowd stopped arguing to see what was making the noise, but the Baudelaires were not interested in seeing anything more, and stepped back from the terrible sound, and huddled against one another with their eyes shut as tightly as possible. Even in this position, however, the children could hear the terrible, terrible sounds from the pit, even over the laughter and cheers of the carnival visitors as they crowded together at the edge of the pit to see what was happening, and so the three youngsters turned away from the commotion, and, with their eyes still closed, slipped away in the confusion, stumbling through all of the cheering people until at last they were in the clear, a phrase which here means "far enough away from the roller coaster that they could no longer see or hear what was going on."

But the Baudelaire orphans, of course, could still imagine what was happening, as I can imagine it, even though I was not there that afternoon and have only read descriptions of what occurred down in the pit. The article in *The Daily Punctilio* says that it was Madame Lulu who fell first, but newspaper articles are often inaccurate, so it is impossible to say if this is actually true. Perhaps she did fall first, and the bald man fell after her, or perhaps Lulu managed to push the bald man in as she tried to escape his grasp, only to slip and join him in the pit just moments later. Or perhaps these two people were still struggling when the plank teetered one more time, and the lions reached both of them at the same time. It is likely that I will never know, just as I will probably never know the location of the fan belt, no matter how many times I return to Caligari Carnival to search for it. At first I thought that Madame Lulu dropped the strip of rubber on the ground near the pit, but I have searched the entire area with a shovel and a flashlight and found no sign of it, and none of the carnival visitors whose houses I have searched seem to have taken it home for a souvenir. Then I thought that perhaps the fan belt was thrown into the air during all the commotion, and perhaps landed up in the tracks of the roller coaster, but I have climbed over every inch without success. And there is, of course, the possibility that it has burned away, but lightning devices are generally made of a certain type of rubber that is difficult to burn, so that possibility seems remote. And so I must admit that I do not know for certain where the fan belt is, and, like knowing whether it was the bald man or Madame Lulu who fell first, that this may be information that will never come to me. But I can imagine that the small strip of rubber ended up in the same place as the woman who removed it from the lightning device and gave it to the Baudelaire orphans, only to snatch it back at the last minute, and in the same place as the associate of Olaf's who was so eager to get a special reward. If I close my eyes, as the Baudelaire orphans closed their eyes as they stumbled away from this unfortunate event, I can imagine that the fan belt, like the bald man and my former associate Olivia, fell into the pit that Olaf and his henchmen had dug, and ended up in the belly of the beast.

CHAPTER
Twelve

When the Baudelaire orphans finally opened their eyes, they found that they had stumbled to the entrance of Madame Lulu's fortune-telling tent, with the initials V.F.D. still staring out at them. Most of the carnival visitors had walked over to the lion pit to see the show, so the siblings were alone in the fading afternoon, and once again there was no one watching over them as they stood in front of the tent, trembling and crying quietly. The last time they had stood for so long at the tent's entrance, the decoration had seemed to change before their very eyes until they saw that it was not a painting of an eye, but the insignia of an organization that might help them. Now they stood and stared again, hoping that something would change before their very eyes until they saw what it was that they could do. But nothing seemed to change no matter how hard they looked. The carnival remained silent, and the afternoon continued to creep toward evening, and the insignia on the tent simply stared back at the weeping Baudelaires.

"I wonder where the fan belt is," Violet said finally. Her voice was faint and almost hoarse, but her tears had stopped at last. "I wonder if it fell to the ground, or was thrown onto the tracks of the roller coaster, or if it ended up—”

“How can you think about a fan belt at a time like this?” Klaus asked, although his voice was not angry. Like his sister, he was still trembling inside the shirt they shared, and felt very tired, as is often the case after a long cry.

“I don’t want to think about anything else,” Violet said. “I don’t want to think about Madame Lulu and the lions, and I don’t want to think about Count Olaf and the crowd, and I don’t want to think about whether or not we did the right thing.”

“Right,” Sunny said gently.

“I agree,” Klaus said. “We did the best we could.”

“I’m not so sure,” Violet replied. “I had the fan belt in my hand. It was all we needed to finish the invention and escape from this awful place.”

“You couldn’t finish the invention,” Klaus said. “We were surrounded by a crowd of people who wanted to see someone thrown to the lions. It’s not our fault that she fell in instead.”

“And bald,” Sunny added.

“But we made the crowd even more frantic,” Violet said. “First we stalled the show, and then we used mob psychology to get them excited about throwing somebody into the pit.”

“Count Olaf is the one who thought up this whole ghastly scheme,” Klaus said. “What happened to Madame Lulu is his fault, not ours.”

“We promised to take her with us,” Violet insisted. “Madame Lulu kept her promise and didn’t tell Count Olaf who we were, but we didn’t keep ours.”

“We tried,” Klaus said. “We tried to keep ours.”

“Trying’s not good enough,” Violet said. “Are we going to *try* to find one of our parents? Are we going to *try* to defeat Count Olaf?”

“Yes,” Sunny said firmly, and wrapped her arms around Violet’s leg. The eldest Baudelaire looked down at her sister and her eyes filled with tears.

“Why are we here?” she asked. “We thought we could put on disguises and get ourselves out of trouble, but we’re worse off than when we began. We don’t know what V.F.D. stands for. We don’t know where the Snicket file is. And we don’t know if one of our parents is really alive.”

“There are some things we might not know,” Klaus said, “but that doesn’t mean we should give up. We can find out what we need to know. We can find out anything.”

Violet smiled through her tears. “You sound like a researcher,” she said.

The middle Baudelaire reached into his pocket and pulled out his glasses. “I *am* a researcher,” he said, and stepped toward the entrance to the tent. “Let’s get to work.”

“Ghede!” Sunny said, which meant something like, “I almost forgot about the archival library!” and she followed her siblings through the flap in the tent.

As soon as the Baudelaire orphans stepped inside, they saw that Madame Lulu had made quite a few preparations for her escape with the children, and it made them very sad to think that she would never return to the fortune-telling tent to collect the things she had waiting for her. Her disguise kit was all packed up again, and waiting by the door so she could take it with her. There was a cardboard box standing next to the cupboard, filled with food that could be eaten on the journey. And laid out on the table, next to Madame Lulu’s replacement crystal ball and various parts of the lightning device she had dismantled, was a large piece of paper that was badly torn and looked very old, but the Baudelaires saw at once that it could help them.

“It’s a map,” Violet said. “It’s a map of the Mortmain Mountains. She must have had it among her papers.”

Klaus put his glasses on and peered at it closely. “Those mountains must be very cold this time of year,” he said. “I didn’t realize the altitude was so high.”

“Never mind the altitude,” Violet said. “Can you find the headquarters Lulu was talking about?”

“Let’s see,” Klaus said. “There’s a star next to Plath Pass, but the key says that a star indicates a campground.”

“Key?” Sunny asked.

“This chart in the corner of the map is called a key,” Klaus explained. “You see? The mapmaker explains what each symbol means, so the map doesn’t get too cluttered.”

“There’s a black rectangle there in the Richter Range,” she said. “See? Over in the east?”

“A black rectangle indicates hibernation grounds,” Klaus said. “There must be quite a few bears in the Mortmain Mountains. Look, there are five hibernation grounds near Silent Springs, and a large cluster of them at the top of Paucity Peak.”

“And here,” Violet said, “in the Valley of Four Drafts, where it looks like Madame Lulu spilled coffee.”

“Valley of Four Drafts!” Klaus said.

“V.F.D.!” Sunny cried.

The Baudelaires peered together at the spot on the map. The Valley of Four Drafts was high up in the Mortmain Mountains, where it would be very cold. The Stricken Stream began there, and wound its way down to the sea in sagging curves through the hinterlands, and the map showed many, many hibernation grounds along the way. There was a small brown stain in the center of the valley, where four gaps in the mountains came together and where Lulu had probably spilled coffee, but there were no markings for a headquarters or for anything else.

“Do you think it means something?” Violet asked. “Or is it just a coincidence, like all the V.F.D.s we’ve come across?”

“I thought the V in V.F.D. stood for ‘volunteer,’” Klaus said. “That’s what we found written on a page of the Quagmire notebooks, and it’s what Jacques Snicket said.”

“Winnow?” Sunny asked, which meant “But where else could the headquarters be? There’s no other marking on the map.”

“Well, if V.F.D. is a secret organization,” Violet said, “they might not put their headquarters on a map.”

“Or it could be marked secretly,” Klaus said, and leaned in to take a good look at the stain. “Maybe this isn’t just a stain,” he said. “Maybe it’s a secret marking. Maybe Madame Lulu put some coffee here on purpose, so she could find the headquarters, but nobody else could.”

“I guess we’ll have to travel there,” Violet said with a sigh, “and find out.”

“How are we going to travel there?” Klaus said. “We don’t know where the fan belt is.”

“We might be missing some parts,” Violet replied, “but that doesn’t mean we should give up. I can build something else.”

“You sound like an inventor,” he said.

Violet smiled, and took her hair ribbon out of her pocket. “I *am* an inventor,” she said. “I’ll look around here and see if there’s anything else we can use. Klaus, you look under the table at the archival library.”

“We’d better get out of the clothes we’re sharing,” Klaus said, “or we can’t do two things at once.”

“Ingredi,” Sunny said, which meant “Meanwhile, I’ll look through all this food and make sure we have everything we need to prepare meals.”

“Good idea,” Violet said. “We’d better hurry before someone finds us.”

“There you are!” called a voice from the entrance to the tent, and the Baudelaires jumped. Violet hurriedly stuffed her ribbon back into her pocket, and Klaus removed his glasses, so they could turn around without revealing their disguise. Count Olaf and Esmé Squalor were standing together in the doorway of the tent, with their arms around one another, looking tired but happy, as if they were two parents coming home after a long day at work, instead of a vicious villain and his scheming girlfriend coming into a fortune-teller’s tent after an afternoon of violence. Esmé Squalor was clutching a small bouquet of ivy her boyfriend had apparently given her, and Count Olaf was holding a flaming torch, which was shining as brightly as his wicked eyes.

“I’ve been looking everywhere for you two,” he said. “What are you doing in here?”

“We decided to let all of you freaks join us,” Esmé said, “even though you weren’t very courageous at the lions’ pit.”

“That’s very kind of you to offer,” Violet said quickly, “but you don’t want cowards like us in your troupe.”

“Sure we do,” Count Olaf said, with a nasty smile. “We keep losing assistants, and it’s always good to have a few to spare. I even asked the woman who runs the gift caravan to join us, but she was too worried about her precious figurines to know that opportunity was knocking.”

“Besides,” Esmé said, stroking Olaf’s hair, “you don’t really have any choice. We’re going to burn this carnival down to eliminate all the evidence that we’ve been here. Most of the tents are already on fire, and the carnival visitors and carnival workers are running for their lives. If you don’t join us, where can you possibly go?”

The Baudelaires looked at one another in dismay. “I guess you’re right,” Klaus said.

“Of course we’re right,” Esmé said. “Now get out of here and help us pack up the trunk.”

“Wait a minute,” Count Olaf said, and strode over to the table. “What’s this?” he demanded. “It looks like a map.”

“It *is* a map,” Klaus admitted with a sigh, wishing he had hidden it in his pockets. “A map of the Mortmain Mountains.”

“The Mortmain Mountains?” Count Olaf said, examining the map eagerly. “Why, that’s where we’re heading! Lulu said that if there was a parent alive, they’d be hiding up there! Does the map show any headquarters on it?”

“I think these black rectangles indicate headquarters,” Esmé said, peering over Olaf’s shoulder. “I’m pretty good at reading maps.”

“No, they represent campgrounds,” Olaf said, looking at the key, but then his face broke out into a smile. “Wait a minute,” he said, and pointed to the stain the Baudelaires had been examining. “I haven’t seen one of these in a long time,” he said, stroking his scraggly chin.

“A small brown stain?” Esmé asked. “You saw that this morning.”

“This is a coded stain,” Count Olaf explained. “I was taught to use this on maps when I was a little boy. It’s to mark a secret location without anyone else noticing.”

“Except a smashing genius,” Esmé said. “I guess we’re heading for the Valley of Four Drafts.”

“V.F.D.,” Count Olaf said, and giggled. “That’s appropriate. Well, let’s go. Is there anything else useful in here?”

The Baudelaires looked quickly at the table, where the archival library was hidden. Underneath the black tablecloth decorated with silver stars was all the crucial information Madame Lulu had gathered to give her visitors what they wanted. The children knew that all sorts of important secrets could be found in the gathering of paper, and they shuddered to think what Count Olaf would do if he discovered all those secrets.

"No," Klaus said finally. "Nothing else useful."

Count Olaf frowned, and kneeled down so that his face was right next to Klaus's. Even without his glasses, the middle Baudelaire could see that Olaf had not washed his one eyebrow for quite some time, and could smell his breath as he spoke. "I think you're lying to me," the villain said, and waved the lit torch in Klaus's face.

"My other head is telling the truth," Violet said.

"Then what is that food doing there?" Count Olaf demanded, pointing at the cardboard box. "Don't you think food would be useful for a long journey?"

The Baudelaires sighed in relief. "Grr!" Sunny growled.

"Chabo compliments you on your cleverness," Klaus said, "and so do we. We hadn't noticed that box."

"That's why I'm the boss," Count Olaf said, "because I'm smart and I have good eyesight." He laughed nastily, and put the torch in Klaus's hand. "Now then," he said, "I want you to light this tent on fire, and then bring the box of food over to the car. Chabo, come with me. I'm sure I'll find something for you to sink your teeth into."

"Grr," Sunny said doubtfully.

"Chabo would prefer to stay with us," Violet said.

"I couldn't care less what Chabo would prefer," Olaf snarled, and picked up the youngest Baudelaire as if she were a watermelon. "Now get busy."

Count Olaf and Esmé Squalor walked out of the tent with Chabo, leaving the elder Baudelaires alone with the flaming torch.

"We'd better pick up the box first," Klaus said, "and light the tent from the outside. Otherwise we'll be surrounded by flames in no time."

"Are we really going to follow Olaf's orders?" Violet asked, looking at the table again. "The archival library might have the answers to all our questions."

"I don't think we have a choice," Klaus said. "Olaf is burning down the whole carnival, and riding with him is our only chance to get to the Mortmain Mountains. You don't have time to invent something, and I don't have time to look through the library."

"We could find one of the other carnival employees," Violet said, "and ask them if they would help us."

"Everyone either thinks that we're freaks or murderers," Klaus said. "Sometimes even I think so."

"If we join Count Olaf," Violet said, "we might become even more freakish and murderous."

"But if we don't join him," Klaus asked, "where can we possibly go?"

"I don't know," Violet said sadly, "but this can't be the right thing to do, can it?"

"Maybe it's harum-scarum," Klaus said, "like Olivia said."

"Maybe it is," Violet said, and walked awkwardly with her brother to the cardboard box and picked it up. Klaus held the torch, and the two Baudelaires walked out of the fortune-telling tent for the last time.

When they first stepped out, still wearing the same pair of pants, it seemed as if night had already fallen, although the air was black and not the blue of the famous hinterlands sunsets. But then Violet and Klaus realized that the air was filling with smoke. Looking around, they saw that many of the tents and caravans were already on fire, as Count Olaf had said, and the flames were billowing black smoke up into the sky. Around them, the last of the carnival visitors were rushing to escape from Olaf's treachery, and in the distance the siblings could hear the panicked roars of the lions, who were still trapped in the pit.

"This isn't the kind of violence I like!" shouted the man with pimples on his face, coughing in the smoke as he ran by. "I prefer it when other people are in danger!"

"Me, too!" said the reporter from *The Daily Punctilio,* running alongside him. "Olaf told me that the Baudelaires are responsible! I can see the headline now: 'BAUDELAIRES CONTINUE THEIR LIVES OF CRIME!'"

"What kind of children would do such a terrible thing?" asked the man with the pimpled chin, but Violet and Klaus could not hear the answer over the voice of Count Olaf.

"Hurry up, you two-headed freak!" he called from around the corner. "If you don't come here right this minute, we're leaving without you!"

"Grr!" Sunny growled frantically, and at the sound of their baby sister's disguised voice, the older Baudelaires threw the lit torch into the fortune-telling tent, and ran toward Olaf's voice without looking back, although it wouldn't have mattered if they had looked. There was so much fire and smoke around them one more burning tent wouldn't have made the carnival look any different. The only difference was that they would have known that part of the fire was of their own devising, a phrase which here means "because of their part in Count Olaf's treachery," and although neither Violet nor Klaus saw this with their own eyes, they knew it in their hearts, and I doubt that they would ever forget it.

When the older Baudelaires rounded the corner, they saw that all of Olaf's other henchmen were already waiting at the long, black automobile, which was parked in front of the freaks' caravan. Hugo, Colette, and Kevin were crowded in the back seat with the two white-faced women, while Esmé Squalor sat in the front, with Sunny on her lap. The hook-handed man took the box out of the older Baudelaires' hands and threw it into the trunk while Count Olaf pointed to the caravan with his whip, which looked much shorter, and rough around the edges.

“You two will ride in that,” he said. “We’re going to attach it to the automobile and pull you along with us.”

“Isn’t there room in the car?” Violet asked nervously.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” the hook-handed man said with a sneer. “It’s too crowded. Good thing Colette is a contortionist, so she can curl into a ball at our feet.”

“Chabo already gnawed my whip down so it could be used as a connecting rope,” Count Olaf said. “I’ll just tie the caravan to the car with a double slipknot, and then we’ll ride off into the sunset.”

“Excuse me,” Violet said, “but I know a knot called the Devil’s Tongue that I think will hold better.”

“And if I remember the map correctly,” Klaus said, “we should ride east until we find Stricken Stream, so we should drive *that* way, away from the sunset.”

“Yes, yes, yes,” Count Olaf said quickly. “That’s what I meant. Tie it yourself if you want. I’ll go start the engine.”

Olaf tossed the rope to Klaus while the hook-handed man reached into the trunk again, and brought out a pair of walkie-talkies the children remembered from when they were living in Olaf’s home. “Take one of these,” he said, putting one in Violet’s hand, “so we can contact you if we need to tell you something.”

“Hurry up,” Count Olaf snapped, taking the other walkie-talkie. “The air is filling with smoke.”

The villain and his henchmen got into the automobile, and Violet and Klaus knelt down to attach the caravan. “I can’t believe I’m using this knot to help Count Olaf," she said. "It feels like I'm using my inventing skills to participate in something wicked."

"We're all participating," Klaus said glumly. "Sunny used her teeth to turn that whip into a connecting rope, and I used my map skills to tell Olaf which direction to head."

"At least we'll get there, too," Violet said, "and maybe one of our parents will be waiting for us. There. The knot's tied. Let's get in the caravan."

"I wish we were riding with Sunny," Klaus said.

"We are," Violet said. "We're not getting to the Mortmain Mountains the way we want, but we're getting there, and that's what counts."

"I hope so," Klaus said, and he and his sister stepped into the freaks' caravan and shut the door. Count Olaf started the engine of the car, and the caravan began to rock gently back and forth as the automobile pulled them away from the carnival. The hammocks swayed above the two siblings, and the rack of clothing creaked beside them, but the knot Violet had tied held fast, and the two vehicles began traveling in the direction Klaus had pointed.

"We might as well get comfortable," Violet said. "We'll be traveling a long time."

"All night at least," Klaus said, "and probably most of the next day. I hope they'll stop and share the food."

"Maybe we can make some hot chocolate later," Violet said.

"With cinnamon," Klaus said, smiling as he thought of Sunny's recipe. "But what should we do in the meantime?"

Violet sighed, and she and her brother sat down on a chair so she could lay her head on the table, which was shaking slightly as the caravan headed out into the hinterlands. The eldest Baudelaire put down the walkie-talkie next to the set of dominoes. “Let’s just sit,” she said, “and think.”

Klaus nodded in agreement, and the two Baudelaires sat and thought for the rest of the afternoon, as the automobile pulled them farther and farther away from the burning carnival. Violet tried to imagine what the V.F.D. headquarters might look like, and hoped that one of their parents would be there. Klaus tried to imagine what Olaf and his troupe were talking about, and hoped that Sunny was not too frightened. And both the older Baudelaires thought about all that had happened at Caligari Carnival, and wondered whether or not they had done the right things. They had disguised themselves in order to find the answers to their questions, and now the answers were burning up under Madame Lulu’s table, as her archival library went up in smoke. They had encouraged their coworkers to find employment someplace where they wouldn’t be considered freaks, and now they had joined Count Olaf’s evil troupe. And they had promised Madame Lulu that they would take her with them, so she could lead them to V.F.D. and become a noble person again, but she had fallen into the lion pit and become nothing but a meal. Violet and Klaus thought about all of the trouble they were in, and wondered if it was all due to simple misfortune, or if some of it was of their own devising. These were not the most pleasant thoughts in the world, but it still felt good to sit and think about them, instead of hiding and lying and frantically thinking up plans. It was peaceful to sit and think in the freaks’ caravan, even when the caravan tilted slightly as they reached the beginning of the Mortmain Mountains and began to head uphill. It was so peaceful to sit and think that both Violet and Klaus felt as if they were waking up from a long sleep when Count Olaf’s voice came out of the walkie-talkie.

“Are you there?” Olaf asked. “Press the red button and speak to me!”

Violet rubbed her eyes, picked up the walkie-talkie, and held it so both she and her brother could hear. “We’re here,” she said.

“Good,” Count Olaf replied, “because I wanted to tell you that I learned something else from Madame Lulu.”

“What did you learn?” Klaus asked.

There was a pause, and the two children could hear cruel peals of laughter coming from the small device in Violet's hand. "I learned that you are the Baudelaires!" Count Olaf cried in triumph. "I learned that you three brats followed me here and tricked me with sneaky disguises. But I'm too clever for you!"

Olaf began to laugh again, but over his laughter the two siblings could hear another sound that made them feel as shaky as the caravan. It was Sunny, and she was whimpering in fear.

"Don't hurt her!" Violet cried. "Don't you dare hurt her!"

"Hurt her?" Count Olaf snarled. "Why, I wouldn't dream of hurting her! After all, I need one orphan to steal the fortune. First I'm going to make sure both of your parents are dead, and then I'm going to use Sunny to become very, very rich! No, I wouldn't worry about this bucktoothed twerp—not yet. If I were you, I'd worry about yourselves! Say bye-bye to your sister, Baudebrats!"

"But we're tied together," Klaus said. "We hitched our caravan to you."

"Look out the window," Count Olaf said, and hung up the walkie-talkie. Violet and Klaus looked at one another, and then staggered to their feet and moved the curtain away from the window. The curtain parted as if they were watching a play, and if I were you I would pretend that this is a play, instead of a book—perhaps a tragedy, written by William Shakespeare—and that you are leaving the theater early to go home and hide under a sofa, because you will recall that there was a certain expression that, I'm sorry to say, must be used three times before this story is over, and it is in the thirteenth chapter when this expression will be used for the third time. The chapter is very short, because the end of this story happened so quickly that it does not take many words to describe, but the chapter does contain the third occasion requiring the expression "the belly of the beast," and you would be wise to leave before the chapter begins, because that time didn't count.

CHAPTER
Thirteen

With the curtain parted, Violet and Klaus looked out the window and gasped at what they saw. In front of them was Count Olaf's long, black automobile, winding its crooked way up the road toward the peaks of the Mortmain Mountains, with the freaks' caravan tied to the bumper. They could not see their baby sister, who was trapped in the front seat with Olaf and his villainous girlfriend, but they could imagine how frightened and desperate she was. But the older Baudelaires also saw something that made them frightened and desperate, and it was something they had never thought to imagine.

Hugo was leaning out of the back window of the automobile, his hump hidden in the oversized coat Esmé Squalor had given him as a present, and he was holding tight to Colette's ankles. The contortionist had twisted her body around to the back of the car so that her head was lying on the middle of the trunk, between two of the bullet holes that had provided air for the Baudelaires on their way to Caligari Carnival. Like her coworker, Colette was also holding tight to someone's ankles—the ambidextrous ankles of Kevin, so that all three of Madame Lulu's former employees were in a sort of human chain. At the end of the chain were Kevin’s hands, which were gripping a long, rusty knife. Kevin looked up at Violet and Klaus, gave them a triumphant grin, and brought the knife down as hard as he could on the knot Violet had tied.

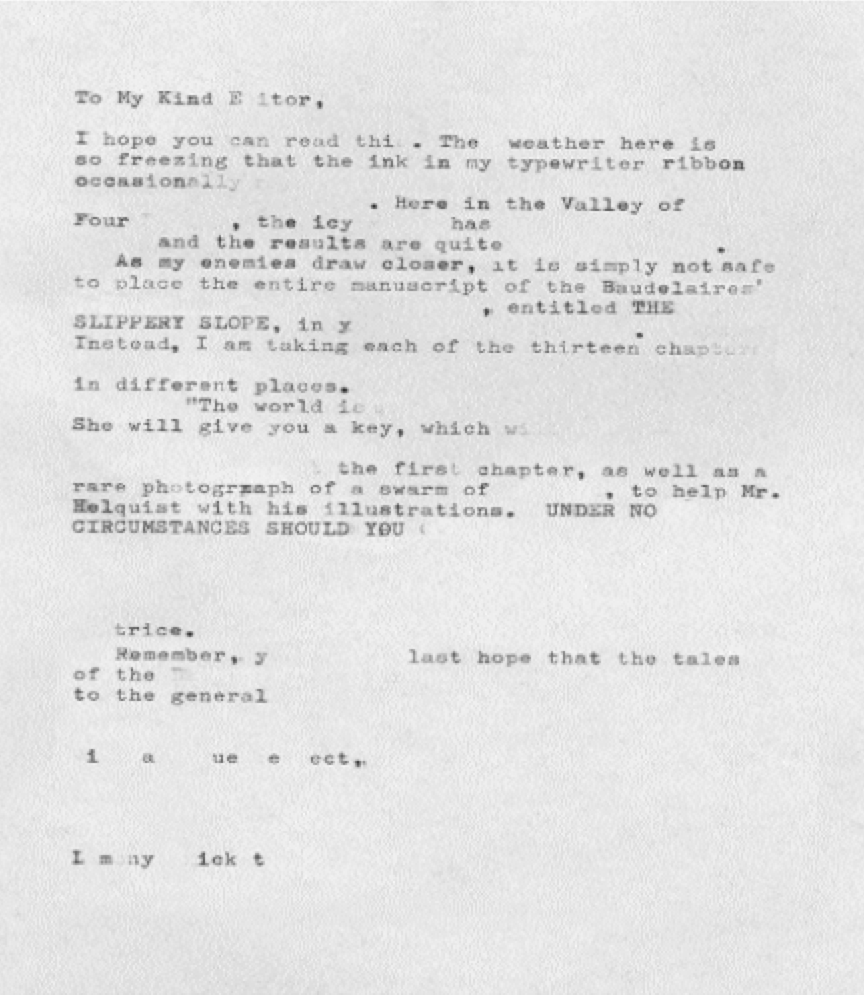
The Devil’s Tongue is a very strong knot, and normally it would take a while for a knife to saw through it, even if it was very sharp, but the equal strength in Kevin’s two arms meant that the knife moved with a freakish power, instead of normally, and in an instant the knot was split in two.

“No!” Violet yelled.

“Sunny!” Klaus screamed.

With the caravan unhitched, the two vehicles began going in opposite directions. Count Olaf’s car continued to wind its way up the mountain, but without anything pulling it, the caravan began to roll back down, the way a grapefruit will roll down a flight of stairs if you let it go, and there was no way for Violet or Klaus to steer or stop the caravan from the inside. The Baudelaires screamed again, all three of them, Violet and Klaus alone in the rattling caravan, and Sunny in the car full of villains, as the two vehicles slipped further and further away from each other, but even though Count Olaf was getting closer and closer to what he wanted and the older Baudelaires were getting further and further away, it seemed to the children that all three siblings were ending up at the same place. Even as Count Olaf’s automobile slipped out of view, and the caravan began to slip on the bumpy road, it seemed to the Baudelaire orphans that they were all slipping into the belly of the beast, and that time, I’m sorry to say, counted very, very much.

To My Kind Editor



To My Kind E itor,

I hope you can read thi . The weather here is
so freezing that the ink in my typewriter ribbon
occasionally
. Here in the Valley of
Four , the icy has
and the results are quite .
As my enemies draw closer, it is simply not safe
to place the entire manuscript of the Baudelaires'
, entitled THE
SLIPPERY SLOPE, in y .
Instead, I am taking each of the thirteen chapters

in different places.
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Helquist with his illustrations. UNDER NO
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A Series of Unfortunate Events

THE BAD BEGINNING

THE REPTILE ROOM

THE WIDE WINDOW

THE MISERABLE MILL

THE AUSTERE ACADEMY

THE ERSATZ ELEVATOR

THE VILE VILLAGE

THE HOSTILE HOSPITAL

THE CARNIVOROUS CARNIVAL

THE SLIPPERY SLOPE

THE GRIM GROTTO

THE PENULTIMATE PERIL

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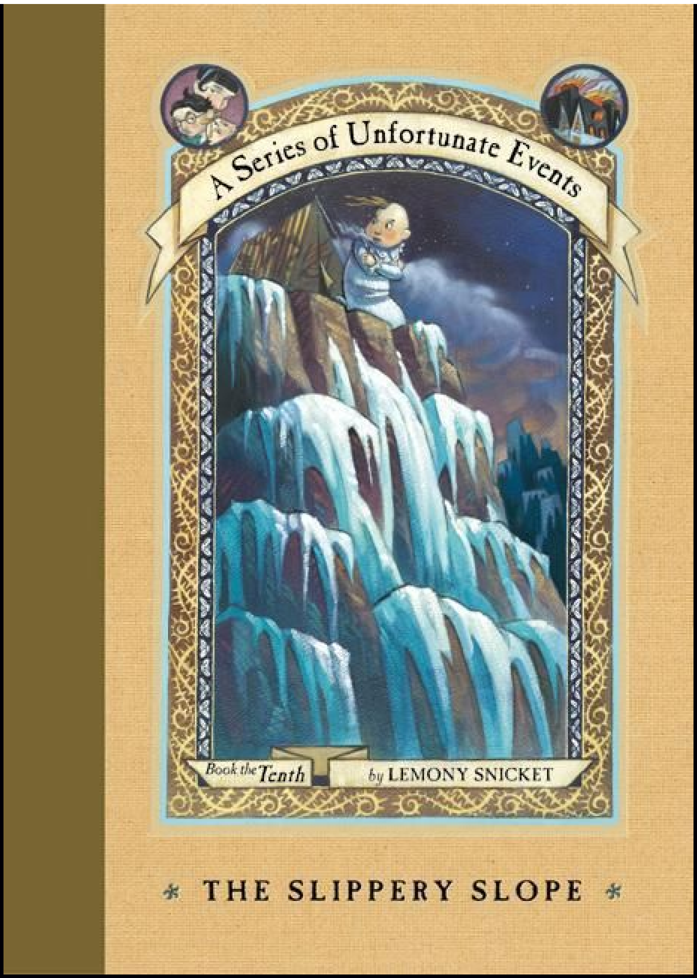
A Series of Unfortunate Events #10: The Slippery Slope


A Series of Unfortunate Events
Book the Tenth
by LEMONY SNICKET
THE SLIPPERY SLOPE

A Series of Unfortunate Events

BOOK the Tenth

THE SLIPPERY SLOPE

***by* LEMONY SNICKET**

***Illustrations by* Brett Helquist**

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Dear Reader

Like handshakes, house pets, or raw carrots, many things are preferable when not slippery. Unfortunately, in this miserable volume, I am afraid that Violet, Klaus, and Sunny Baudelaire run into more than their fair share of slipperiness during their harrowing journey up?and down?a range of strange and distressing mountains.

In order to spare you any further repulsion, it would be best not to mention any of the unpleasant details of this story, particularly a secret message, a toboggan, a deceitful trap, a swarm of snow gnats, a scheming villain, a troupe of organized youngsters, a covered casserole dish, and a surprising survivor of a terrible fire.

Unfortunately, I have dedicated my life to researching and recording the sad tale of the Baudelaire orphans. There is no reason for you to dedicate yourself to such things, and you might instead dedicate yourself to letting this slippery book slip from your hands into a nearby trash receptacle, or deep pit.

With all due respect,

Lemony Snicket

Lemony Snicket

A Series of Unfortunate Events
LEMONY SNICKET

For Beatrice—

When we met, you were pretty, and I was lonely.

Now, I am pretty lonely.

CHAPTER
One

A man of my acquaintance once wrote a poem called “The Road Less Traveled,” describing a journey he took through the woods along a path most travelers never used. The poet found that the road less traveled was peaceful but quite lonely, and he was probably a bit nervous as he went along, because if anything happened on the road less traveled, the other travelers would be on the road more frequently traveled and so couldn’t hear him as he cried for help. Sure enough, that poet is now dead.

Like a dead poet, this book can be said to be on the road less traveled, because it begins with the three Baudelaire children on a path leading through the Mortmain Mountains, which is not a popular destination for travelers, and it ends in the churning waters of the Stricken Stream, which few travelers even go near. But this book is also on the road less traveled, because unlike books most people prefer, which provide comforting and entertaining tales about charming people and talking animals, the tale you are reading now is nothing but distressing and unnerving, and the people unfortunate enough to be in the story are far more desperate and frantic than charming, and I would prefer to not speak about the animals at all. For that reason, I can no more suggest the reading of this woeful book than I can recommend wandering around the woods by yourself, because like the road less traveled, this book is likely to make you feel lonely, miserable, and in need of help.

The Baudelaire orphans, however, had no choice but to be on the road less traveled. Violet and Klaus, the two elder Baudelaires, were in a caravan, traveling very quickly along the high mountain path. Neither Violet, who was fourteen, nor Klaus, who had recently turned thirteen, had ever thought they would find themselves on this road, except perhaps with their parents on a family vacation. But the Baudelaire parents were nowhere to be found after a terrible fire destroyed their home—although the children had reason to believe that one parent may not have died in the blaze after all—and the caravan was not heading up the Mortmain Mountains, toward a secret headquarters the siblings had heard about and were hoping to find. The caravan was heading down the Mortmain Mountains, very quickly, with no way to control or stop its journey, so Violet and Klaus felt more like fish in a stormy sea than travelers on a vacation.

But Sunny Baudelaire was in a situation that could be said to be even more desperate. Sunny was the youngest Baudelaire, still learning to speak in a way that everyone could understand, so she scarcely had words for how frightened she was. Sunny was traveling uphill, toward the headquarters in the Mortmain Mountains, in an automobile that was working perfectly, but the driver of the automobile was a man who was reason enough for being terrified. Some people called this man wicked. Some called him facinorous, which is a fancy word for "wicked." But everyone called him Count Olaf, unless he was wearing one of his ridiculous disguises and making people call him a false name. Count Olaf was an actor, but he had largely abandoned his theatrical career to try to steal the enormous fortune the Baudelaire parents had left behind. Olaf's schemes to get the fortune had been mean-spirited and particularly complicated, but nevertheless he had managed to attract a girlfriend, a villainous and stylish woman named Esmé Squalor, who was sitting next to Count Olaf in the car, cackling nastily and clutching Sunny on her lap. Also in the car were several employees of Olaf's, including a man with hooks instead of hands, two women who liked to wear white powder all over their faces, and three new comrades Olaf had recently recruited at Caligari Carnival. The Baudelaire children had been at the carnival, too, wearing disguises of their own, and had pretended to join Count Olaf in his treachery, but the villain had seen through their ruse, a phrase which here means "realized who they really were, and cut the knot attaching the caravan to the car, leaving Sunny in Olaf's clutches and her siblings tumbling toward their doom." Sunny sat in the car and felt Esmé's long fingernails scratch her shoulders, and worried about what would happen to her and what was happening to her older siblings, as she heard their screams getting fainter and fainter as the car drove farther and farther away.

"We have to stop this caravan!" Klaus screamed. Hurriedly, he put on his glasses, as if by improving his vision he might improve the situation. But even in perfect focus, he could see their predicament was dire. The caravan had served as a home for several performers at the carnival's House of Freaks before they defected—a word which here means "joined Count Olaf's band of revolting comrades"—and now the contents of this tiny home were rattling and crashing with each bump in the road. Klaus ducked to avoid a roasting pan, which Hugo the hunchback had used to prepare meals and which had toppled off a shelf in the commotion. He lifted his feet from the floor as a set of dominoes skittered by—a set that Colette the contortionist had liked to play with. And he squinted above him as a hammock swung violently overhead. An ambidextrous person named Kevin used to sleep in that hammock until he had joined Olaf's troupe, along with Hugo and Colette, and now it seemed like it might fall at any moment and trap the Baudelaires beneath it.

The only comforting thing that Klaus could see was his sister, who was looking around the caravan with a fierce and thoughtful expression and unbuttoning the shirt the two siblings were sharing as part of their disguise. "Help me get us out of these freakish pants we're both in," Violet said. "There's no use pretending we're a two-headed person anymore, and we both need to be as able-bodied as possible."

In moments, the two Baudelaires wriggled out of the oversized clothing they had taken from Count Olaf's disguise kit and were standing in regular clothes, trying to balance in the shaky caravan. Klaus quickly stepped out of the path of a falling potted plant, but he couldn't help smiling as he looked at his sister. Violet was tying her hair up in a ribbon to keep it out of her eyes, a sure sign that she was thinking up an invention. Violet's impressive mechanical skills had saved the Baudelaires' lives more times than they could count, and Klaus was certain that his sister could concoct something that could stop the caravan's perilous journey.

"Are you going to make a brake?" Klaus asked.

"Not yet," Violet said. "A brake interferes with the wheels of a vehicle, and this caravan's wheels are spinning too quickly for interference. I'm going to unhook these hammocks and use them as a drag chute."

"Drag chute?" Klaus said.

"Drag chutes are a little like parachutes attached to the back of a car," Violet explained hurriedly, as a coatrack clattered around her. She reached up to the hammock where she and Klaus had slept and quickly detached it from the wall. "Race drivers use them to help stop their cars when a race is over. If I dangle these hammocks out the caravan door, we should slow down considerably."

"What can I do?" Klaus said.

"Look in Hugo's pantry," Violet said, "and see if you can find anything sticky."

When someone tells you to do something unusual without an explanation, it is very difficult not to ask why, but Klaus had learned long ago to have faith in his sister's ideas, and quickly crossed to a large cupboard Hugo had used to store ingredients for the meals he prepared. The door of the cupboard was swinging back and forth as if a ghost were fighting with it, but most of the items were still rattling around inside. Klaus looked at the cupboard and thought of his baby sister, who was getting farther and farther away from him. Even though Sunny was still quite young, she had recently shown an interest in cooking, and Klaus remembered how she had made up her own hot chocolate recipe, and helped prepare a delicious soup the entire caravan had enjoyed. Klaus held the cupboard door open and peered inside, and hoped that his sister would survive to develop her culinary skills.

"Klaus," Violet said firmly, taking down another hammock and tying it to the first one. "I don't mean to rush you, but we need to stop this caravan as soon as possible. Have you found anything sticky?"

Klaus blinked and returned to the task at hand. A ceramic pitcher rolled around his feet as he pushed through the bottles and jars of cooking materials. "There's lots of sticky things here," he said. "I see blackstrap molasses, wild clover honey, corn syrup, aged balsamic vinegar, apple butter, strawberry jam, caramel sauce, maple syrup, butterscotch topping, maraschino liqueur, virgin and extra-virgin olive oil, lemon curd, dried apricots, mango chutney, *crema di noci*, tamarind paste, hot mustard, marshmallows, creamed corn, peanut butter, grape preserves, salt water taffy, condensed milk, pumpkin pie filling, and glue. I don't know why Hugo kept glue in the pantry, but never mind. Which items do you want?"

"All of them," Violet said firmly. "Find some way of mixing them, while I tie these hammocks together."

Klaus grabbed the pitcher from the floor and began to pour the ingredients into it, while Violet, sitting on the floor to make it easier to balance, gathered the cords of the hammocks in her lap and began twisting them into a knot. The caravan's journey grew rougher and rougher, and with each jolt, the Baudelaires felt a bit seasick, as if they were back on Lake Lachrymose, crossing its stormy waters to try and rescue one of their many unfortunate guardians. But despite the tumult around them, in moments Violet stood up with the hammocks gathered in her arms, all tied together in a mass of fabric, and Klaus looked at his sister and held up the pitcher, which was filled to the brim with a thick and colorful slime.

"When I say the word," Violet said, "I'm going to open the door and cast these hammocks out. I want you at the other end of the caravan, Klaus. Open that little window and pour that mixture all over the wheels. If the hammocks work as a drag chute and the sticky substance interferes with the wheels, the caravan should slow down enough to save us. I just need to tie the hammocks to the doorknob."

"Are you using the Devil's Tongue knot?" Klaus asked.

“The Devil’s Tongue hasn’t brought us the best luck,” Violet said, referring to several previous rope-related escapades. “I’m using the Sumac, a knot I invented myself. I named it after a singer I admire. There—it feels secure. Are you ready to pour that mixture onto the wheels?”

Klaus crossed to the window and opened it. The wild clattering sound of the caravan’s wheels grew louder, and the Baudelaires stared for a moment at the countryside racing by. The land was jagged and twisty, and it seemed that the caravan could tumble at any moment into a hole, or off the edge of one of the mountain’s square peaks. “I guess I’m ready,” Klaus said hesitantly. “Violet, before we try your invention, I want to tell you something.”

“If we don’t try it now,” Violet said grimly, “you won’t have the chance to tell me anything.” She gave her knot one more tug and then turned back to Klaus. “Now!” she said, and threw open the caravan door.

It is often said that if you have a room with a view, you will feel peaceful and relaxed, but if the room is a caravan hurtling down a steep and twisted road, and the view is an eerie mountain range racing backward away from you, while chilly mountain winds sting your face and toss dust into your eyes, then you will not feel one bit of peace or relaxation. Instead you will feel the horror and panic that the Baudelaires felt when Violet opened the door. For a moment they could do nothing but stand still, feeling the wild tilting of the caravan, and looking up at the odd, square peaks of the Mortmain Mountains, and hearing the grinding of the caravan’s wheels as they rolled over rocks and tree stumps. But then Violet shouted “Now!” once more, and both siblings snapped into action. Klaus leaned out the window and began to pour the mixture of blackstrap molasses, wild clover honey, corn syrup, aged balsamic vinegar, apple butter, strawberry jam, caramel sauce, maple syrup, butterscotch topping, maraschino liqueur, virgin and extra-virgin olive oil, lemon curd, dried apricots, mango chutney, *crema di noci*, tamarind paste, hot mustard, marshmallows, creamed corn, peanut butter, grape preserves, salt water taffy, condensed milk, pumpkin pie filling, and glue onto the closest wheels, while his sister tossed the hammocks out of the door, and if you have read anything of the Baudelaire orphans’ lives—which I hope you have not—then you will not be surprised to read that Violet's invention worked perfectly. The hammocks immediately caught the rushing air and swelled out behind the caravan like enormous cloth balloons, which slowed the caravan down quite a bit, the way you would run much slower if you were dragging something behind you, like a knapsack or a sheriff. The sticky mixture fell on the spinning wheels, which immediately began to move with less ferocity, the way you would run with less ferocity if you suddenly found yourself running in quicksand or through lasagne. The caravan slowed down, and the wheels spun less wildly, and within moments the two Baudelaires were traveling at a much more comfortable pace.

"It's working!" Klaus cried.

"We're not done yet," Violet said, and walked over to a small table that had overturned in the confusion. When the Baudelaires were living at Caligari Carnival, the table had come in handy as a place to sit and make plans, but now in the Mortmain Mountains, it would come in handy for a different reason. Violet dragged the table over to the open door. "Now that the wheels are slowing down," she said, "we can use this as a brake."

Klaus dumped the last of the mixture out of the pitcher, and turned to his sister. "How?" he said, but Violet was already showing him how. Quickly she lay on the floor, and holding the table by its legs, dangled it out of the caravan so it dragged on the ground. Immediately there was a loud scraping sound, and the table began to shake roughly in Violet's hands. But she held fast, forcing the table to scrape against the rocky ground and slow the caravan down even more. The swaying of the caravan became gentler and gentler, and the fallen items owned by the carnival employees stopped crashing, and then with one last whine, the wheels stopped altogether, and everything was still. Violet leaned out of the door and stuck the table in front of one of the wheels so it couldn't start rolling again, and then stood up and looked at her brother.

"We did it," Violet said.

"*You* did it," Klaus said. "The entire plan was your idea." He put down the pitcher on the floor and wiped his hands on a fallen towel.

“Don’t put down that pitcher,” Violet said, looking around the wreckage of the caravan. “We should gather up as many useful things as possible. We’ll need to get this caravan moving uphill if we want to rescue Sunny.”

“And reach the headquarters,” Klaus added. “Count Olaf has the map we found, but I remember that the headquarters are in the Valley of Four Drafts, near the source of the Stricken Stream. It’ll be very cold there.”

“Well, there is plenty of clothing,” Violet said, looking around. “Let’s grab everything we can and organize it outside.”

Klaus nodded in agreement, and picked up the pitcher again, along with several items of clothing that had fallen in a heap on top of a small hand mirror that belonged to Colette. Staggering from carrying so many things, he walked out of the caravan behind his sister, who was carrying a large bread knife, three heavy coats, and a ukulele that Hugo used to play sometimes on lazy afternoons. The floors of the caravan creaked as the Baudelaires stepped outside, into the misty and empty landscape, and realized how fortunate they had been.

The caravan had stopped right at the edge of one of the odd, square peaks of the mountain range. The Mortmain Mountains looked like a staircase, heading up into the clouds or down into a veil of thick, gray mist, and if the caravan had kept going in the same direction, the two Baudelaires would have toppled over the peak and fallen down through the mist to the next stair, far, far below. But to one side of the caravan, the children could see the waters of the Stricken Stream, which were an odd grayish black color, and moved slowly and lazily downhill like a river of spilled oil. Had the caravan swerved to one side, the children would have been dumped into the dark and filthy waters.

“It looks like the brake worked just in time,” Violet said quietly. “No matter where the caravan would have gone, we would have been finished.”

Klaus nodded in agreement and looked around at the wilderness. “It will be difficult to navigate the caravan out of here,” Klaus said. “You’ll have to invent a steering device.”

“And some sort of engine,” Violet said. “That will take some time.”

“We don’t have any time,” Klaus said. “If we don’t hurry, Count Olaf will be too far away and we’ll never find Sunny.”

“We’ll find her,” Violet said firmly, and put down the items she was carrying. “Let’s go back into the caravan, and look for—”

But before Violet could say what to look for, she was interrupted by an unpleasant crackling noise. The caravan seemed to moan, and then slowly began to roll toward the edge of the peak. The Baudelaires looked down and saw that the wheels had smashed the small table, so there was nothing to stop the caravan from moving again. Slowly and awkwardly it pitched forward, dragging the hammocks behind it as it neared the very edge of the peak. Klaus leaned down to grab hold of a hammock, but Violet stopped him. “It’s too heavy,” she said. “We can’t stop it.”

“We can’t let it fall off the peak!” Klaus cried.

“We’d be dragged down, too,” Violet said.

Klaus knew his sister was right, but still he wanted to grab the drag chute Violet had constructed. It is difficult, when faced with a situation you cannot control, to admit that you can do nothing, and it was difficult for the Baudelaires to stand and watch the caravan roll over the edge of the peak. There was one last creak as the back wheels bumped against a mound of dirt, and then the caravan disappeared in absolute silence. The Baudelaires stepped forward and peered over the edge of the peak, but it was so misty that the caravan was only a ghostly rectangle, getting smaller and smaller as it faded away.

“Why isn’t there a crash?” Klaus asked.

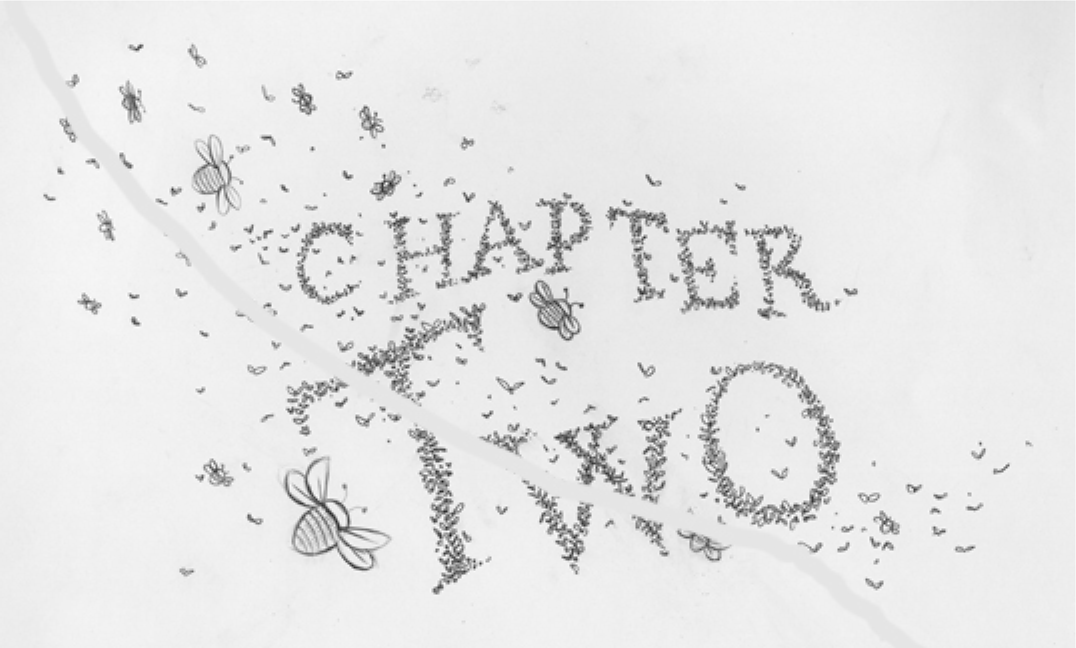
“The drag chute is slowing it down,” Violet said. “Just wait.”

The siblings waited, and after a moment there was a muffled *boom!* from below as the caravan met its fate. In the mist, the children could not see a thing, but they knew that the caravan and everything inside it were gone forever, and indeed I have never been able to find its remains, even after months of searching the area with only a lantern and a rhyming dictionary for company. It seems that even after countless nights of battling snow gnats and praying the batteries would not run out, it is my fate that some of my questions will never be answered.

Fate is like a strange, unpopular restaurant, filled with odd waiters who bring you things you never asked for and don’t always like. When the Baudelaires were very young, they would have guessed that their fate was to grow up in happiness and contentment with their parents in the Baudelaire mansion, but now both the mansion and their parents were gone. When they were attending Prufrock Preparatory School, they had thought that their fate was to graduate alongside their friends the Quagmires, but they hadn’t seen the academy or the two triplets in a very long time. And just moments ago, it had looked like Violet and Klaus’s fate had been to fall off a peak or into a stream, but now they were alive and well, but far away from their sister and without a vehicle to help them find her again.

Violet and Klaus moved closer to one another, and felt the icy winds of the Mortmain Mountains blow down the road less traveled and give them goosebumps. They looked at the dark and swirling waters of the Stricken Stream, and they looked down from the edge of the peak into the mist, and then looked at one another and shivered, not only at the fates they had avoided, but at all the mysterious fates that lay ahead.

CHAPTER
Two



Violet took one last look over the misty peak, and then reached down to put on one of the heavy coats she had taken from the caravan. “Take one of these coats,” she said to her brother. “It’s cold out here, and it’s likely to get even colder. The headquarters are supposed to be very high up in the mountains. By the time we get there, we’ll probably be wearing every stitch of this clothing.”

“But how are we going to get there?” Klaus said. “We’re nowhere near the Valley of Four Drafts, and the caravan is destroyed.”

“Let’s take a moment to see what we have,” Violet said. “I might be able to construct something from the items we managed to take.”

“I hope so,” Klaus said. “Sunny is getting farther and farther away. We’ll never catch up with her without some sort of vehicle.”

Klaus spread out the items from the caravan, and put on one of the coats while Violet picked through her pile, but instantly the two Baudelaires saw that a vehicle was not in the realm of possibility, a phrase which here means “could not be made from a few small objects and some articles of clothing previously belonging to carnival employees.” Violet tied her hair up in a ribbon again and frowned down on the few items they had managed to save. In Klaus’s pile there was the pitcher, still sticky from the substance he had used to slow down the caravan wheels, as well as Colette’s hand mirror, a wool poncho, and a sweatshirt that read CALIGARI CARNIVAL. In Violet’s pile was the large bread knife, the ukulele, and one more coat. Even Klaus, who was not as mechanically minded as his sister, knew that the materials gathered on the ground were not enough to make something that could take the two children through the Mortmain Mountains.

“I suppose I could make a spark by rubbing two rocks together,” Violet said, looking around the misty countryside for additional inventing materials, “or we could play the ukulele and bang on the pitcher. A loud noise might attract some help.”

“But who would hear it?” Klaus said, gazing at the gloomy mist. “We didn’t see a sign of anyone else when we were in the caravan. The way through the Mortmain Mountains is like a poem I read once, about the road less traveled.”

“Did the poem have a happy ending?” Violet asked.

“It was neither happy nor unhappy,” Klaus said. “It was ambiguous. Well, let’s gather up these materials and take them with us.”

“Take them with us?” Violet said. “We don’t know where to go, and we don’t know how to get there.”

“Sure we do,” Klaus said. “The Stricken Stream starts at a source high in the mountains, and winds its way down through the Valley of Four Drafts, where the headquarters are. It’s probably not the quickest or easiest way to get there, but if we follow the stream up the mountains, it’ll take us where we want to go.”

“But that could take days,” Violet said. “We don’t have a map, or any food or water for the journey, or tents or sleeping bags or any other camping equipment.”

“We can use all this clothing as blankets,” Klaus said, “and we can sleep in any shelter we find. There were quite a few caves on the map that animals use for hibernation.”

The two Baudelaires looked at one another and shivered in the chilly breeze. The idea of hiking for hours in the mountains, only to sleep wrapped in someone else’s clothing in a cave that might contain hibernating animals, was not a pleasant one, and the siblings wished they did not have to take the road less traveled, but instead could travel in a swift, well-heated vehicle and reach their sister in mere moments. But wishing, like sipping a glass of punch, or pulling aside a bearskin rug in order to access a hidden trapdoor in the floor, is merely a quiet way to spend one’s time before the candles are extinguished on one’s birthday cake, and the Baudelaires knew that it would be best to stop wishing and start their journey. Klaus put the hand mirror and the ukulele in his coat pockets and picked up the poncho and the pitcher, while Violet put the bread knife in her pocket and picked up the sweatshirt and the last coat, and then, with one last look at the tracks the caravan left behind as it toppled over the peak, the two children began to follow the Stricken Stream.

If you have ever traveled a long distance with a family member, then you know that there are times when you feel like talking and times when you feel like being quiet. This was one of the quiet times. Violet and Klaus walked up the slopes of the mountain toward the headquarters they hoped to reach, and they heard the sound of the mountain winds, a low, tuneless moan like someone blowing across the top of an empty bottle, and the odd, rough sound of the stream's fish as they stuck their heads out of the dark, thick waters of the stream, but both travelers were in a quiet mood and did not say a word to one another, each lost in their own thoughts.

Violet let her mind wander to the time she had spent with her siblings in the Village of Fowl Devotees, when a mysterious man named Jacques Snicket was murdered, and the children were blamed for the crime. They had managed to escape from prison and rescue their friends Duncan and Isadora Quagmire from Count Olaf's clutches, but then had been separated at the last moment from the two triplets, who sailed away in a self-sustaining hot air mobile home built by a man named Hector. None of the Baudelaires had seen Hector or the two Quagmires since, and Violet wondered if they were safe and if they had managed to contact a secret organization they'd discovered. The organization was called V.F.D., and the Baudelaires had not yet learned exactly what the organization did, or even what all the letters stood for. The children thought that the headquarters at the Valley of Four Drafts might prove to be helpful, but now, as the eldest Baudelaire trudged alongside the Stricken Stream, she wondered if she would ever find the answers she was looking for.

Klaus was also thinking about the Quagmires, although he was thinking about when the Baudelaires first met them, at Prufrock Preparatory School. Many of the students at the school had been quite mean to the three siblings—particularly a very nasty girl named Carmelita Spats—but Isadora and Duncan had been very kind, and soon the Baudelaires and the Quagmires had become inseparable, a word which here means "close friends." One reason for their friendship had been that both sets of children had lost people who were close to them. The Baudelaires had lost their parents, of course, and the Quagmires had lost not only their parents but their brother, the third Quagmire triplet, whose name was Quigley. Klaus thought about the Quagmires' tragedy, and felt a little guilty that one of his own parents might be alive after all. A document the Baudelaires had found contained a picture of their parents standing with Jacques Snicket and another man, with a caption reading "Because of the evidence discussed on page nine, experts now suspect that there may in fact be one survivor of the fire, but the survivor's whereabouts are unknown." Klaus had this document in his pocket right now, along with a few scraps of the Quagmires' notebooks that they had managed to give him. Klaus walked beside his older sister, thinking of the puzzle of V.F.D. and how kindly the Quagmires had tried to help them solve the mystery that surrounded them all. He was thinking so hard about these things that when Violet finally broke the silence, it was as if he were waking up from a long, confusing dream.

"Klaus," she said, "when we were in the caravan, you said you wanted to tell me something before we tried the invention, but I didn't let you. What was it?"

"I don't know," Klaus admitted. "I just wanted to say something, in case—well, in case the invention didn't work." He sighed, and looked up at the darkening sky. "I don't remember the last thing I said to Sunny," he said quietly. "It must have been when we were in Madame Lulu's tent, or maybe outside, just before we stepped into the caravan. Had I known that Count Olaf was going to take her away, I would have tried to say something special. I could have complimented her on the hot chocolate she made, or told her how skillful she was at staying in disguise."

"You can tell her those things," Violet said, "when we see her again."

"I hope so," Klaus said glumly, "but we're so far behind Olaf and his troupe."

"But we know where they're going," Violet said, "and we know that he won't harm a hair on her head. Count Olaf thinks we perished in the caravan, so he needs Sunny to get his hands on the fortune."

"She's probably unharmed," Klaus agreed, "but I'm sure she's very frightened. I just hope she knows we're coming after her."

"Me, too," Violet said, and walked in a silence for a while, interrupted only by the wind and the odd, gurgling noise of the fish.

"I think those fish are having trouble breathing," Klaus said, pointing into the stream. "Something in the water is making them cough."

“Maybe the Stricken Stream isn’t always that ugly color,” Violet said. “What would turn normal water into grayish black slime?”

“Iron ore,” Klaus said thoughtfully, trying to remember a book on high-altitude environmentalism he had read when he was ten. “Or perhaps a clay deposit, loosened by an earthquake or another geological event, or some sort of pollution. There might be an ink or licorice factory nearby.”

“Maybe V.F.D. will tell us,” Violet said, “when we reach the headquarters.”

“Maybe one of our parents will tell us,” Klaus said quietly.

“We shouldn’t get our hopes up,” Violet said. “Even if one of our parents really did survive the fire, and the V.F.D. headquarters really are at the Valley of Four Drafts, we still don’t know that we will see them when we arrive.”

“I don’t see the harm in getting our hopes up,” Klaus said. “We’re walking along a damaged stream, toward a vicious villain, in an attempt to rescue our sister and find the headquarters of a secret organization. I could use a little bit of hope right now.”

Violet stopped in her path. “I could use another layer of clothing,” she said. “It’s getting colder.”

Klaus nodded in agreement, and held up the garment he was carrying. “Do you want the poncho,” he asked, “or the sweatshirt?”

“The poncho, if you don’t mind,” Violet said. “After my experience in the House of Freaks, I don’t wish to advertise the Caligari Carnival.”

“Me neither,” Klaus said, taking the lettered sweatshirt from his sister. “I think I’ll wear it inside out.”

Rather than take off their coats and expose themselves to the icy winds of the Mortmain Mountains, Klaus put on the inside-out sweatshirt over his coat, and Violet wore the poncho outside hers, where it hung awkwardly around her. The two elder Baudelaires looked at one another and had to smile at their ridiculous appearance.

"These are worse than the pinstripe suits Esmé Squalor gave us," Violet said.

"Or those itchy sweaters we wore when we stayed with Mr. Poe," Klaus said, referring to a banker who was in charge of the Baudelaire fortune, with whom they had lost touch. "But at least we'll keep warm. If it gets even colder, we can take turns wearing the extra coat."

"If one of our parents is at the headquarters," Violet said, "he or she might not recognize us underneath all this clothing. We'll look like two large lumps."

The two Baudelaires looked up at the snow-covered peaks above them and felt a bit dizzy, not only from the height of the Mortmain Mountains but from all the questions buzzing around their heads. Could they really reach the Valley of Four Drafts all by themselves? What would the headquarters look like? Would V.F.D. be expecting the Baudelaires? Would Count Olaf have reached the headquarters ahead of them? Would they find Sunny? Would they find one of their parents? Violet and Klaus looked at one another in silence and shivered in their strange clothes, until finally Klaus broke the silence with one more question, which seemed the dizziest one of all.

"Which parent," he said, "do you think is the survivor?"

Violet opened her mouth to answer, but at that moment another question immediately occupied the minds of the elder Baudelaires. It is a dreadful question, and nearly everyone who has found themselves asking it has ended up wishing that they'd never brought up the subject. My brother asked the question once, and had nightmares about it for weeks. An associate of mine asked the question, and found himself falling through the air before he could hear the answer. It is a question I asked once, a very long time ago and in a very timid voice, and a woman replied by quickly putting a motorcycle helmet on her head and wrapping her body in a red silk cape. The question is, "What in the world is that ominous-looking cloud of tiny, white buzzing objects coming toward us?” and I’m sorry to tell you that the answer is “A swarm of well-organized, ill-tempered insects known as snow gnats, who live in cold mountain areas and enjoy stinging people for no reason whatsoever.”

“What in the world,” Violet said, “is that ominous-looking cloud of tiny, white buzzing objects coming toward us?”

Klaus looked in the direction his sister was pointing and frowned. “I remember reading something in a book on mountainous insect life,” he said, “but I can’t quite recall the details.”

“Try to remember,” Violet said, looking nervously at the approaching swarm. The ominous-looking cloud of tiny, white buzzing objects had appeared from around a rocky corner, and from a distance it looked a bit like the beginnings of a snowfall. But now the snowfall was organizing itself into the shape of an arrow, and moving toward the two children, buzzing louder and louder as if it were annoyed. “I think they might be snow gnats,” Klaus said. “Snow gnats live in cold mountain areas and have been known to group themselves into well-defined shapes.”

Violet looked from the approaching arrow to the waters of the stream and the steep edge of the mountain peak. “I’m glad gnats are harmless,” she said. “It doesn’t look like there’s any way to avoid them.”

“There’s something else about snow gnats,” Klaus said, “that I’m not quite remembering.”

The swarm drew quite close, with the tip of the fluttering white arrow just a few inches from the Baudelaires’ noses, and then stopped in its path, buzzing angrily. The two siblings stood face-to-face with the snow gnats for a long, tense second, and the gnat at the very, very tip of the arrow flew daintily forward and stung Violet on the nose.

“Ow!” Violet said. The snow gnat flew back to its place, and the eldest Baudelaire was left rubbing a tiny red mark on her nose. “That hurt,” she said. “It feels like a pin stuck me.”

“I remember now,” Klaus said. “Snow gnats are ill-tempered and enjoy stinging people for no reason whatso—”

But Klaus did not get to finish his sentence, because the snow gnats interrupted and gave a ghastly demonstration of just what he was talking about. Curling lazily in the mountain winds, the arrow twisted and became a large buzzing circle, and the gnats began to spin around and around the two Baudelaires like a well-organized and ill-tempered hula hoop. Each gnat was so tiny that the children could not see any of its features, but they felt as if the insects were smiling nastily.

“Are the stings poisonous?” Violet asked.

“Mildly,” Klaus said. “We’ll be all right if we get stung a few times, but many stings could make us very ill. Ow!”

One of the gnats had flown up and stung Klaus on the cheek, as if it were seeing if the middle Baudelaire was fun to hurt. “People always say that if you don’t bother stinging insects, they won’t bother you,” Violet said nervously. “Ow!”

“That’s scarcely ever true,” Klaus said, “and it’s certainly not true with snow gnats. Ow! Ow! *Ow!*”

“What should we—*Ow!*” Violet half asked.

“I don’t—*Ow!*” Klaus half answered, but in moments the Baudelaires did not have time for even half a conversation. The circle of snow gnats began spinning faster and faster, and the insects spread themselves out so it looked as if the two siblings were in the middle of a tiny, white tornado. Then, in a series of manuevers that must have taken a great deal of rehearsal, the gnats began stinging the Baudelaires, first on one side and then on the other. Violet shrieked as several gnats stung her chin. Klaus shouted as a handful of gnats stung his left ear. And both Baudelaires cried out as they tried to wave the gnats away only to feel the stingers all over their waving hands. The snow gnats stung to the left, and stung to the right. They approached the Baudelaires from above, making the children duck, and then from below, making the children stand on tiptoe in an effort to avoid them. And all the while, the swarm buzzed louder and louder, as if wishing to remind the Baudelaires how much fun the insects were having. Violet and Klaus closed their eyes and stood together, too scared to walk blindly and find themselves falling off a mountain peak or sinking into the waters of the Stricken Stream.

"Coat!" Klaus managed to shout, then spit out a gnat that had flown into his open mouth in the hopes of stinging his tongue. Violet understood at once, and grabbed the extra coat in her hands and draped it over Klaus and herself like a large, limp umbrella of cloth. The snow gnats buzzed furiously, trying to get inside to continue stinging them, but had to settle for stinging the Baudelaires' hands as they held the coat in place. Violet and Klaus looked at one another dimly underneath the coat, wincing as their fingers were stung, and tried to keep walking.

"We'll never reach the Valley of Four Drafts like this," Violet said, speaking louder than usual over the buzzing of the gnats. "How can we stop them, Klaus?"

"Fire drives them away," Klaus said. "In the book I read, the author said that even the smell of smoke can keep a whole swarm at bay. But we can't start a fire underneath a coat."

"Ow!" A snow gnat stung Violet's thumb on a spot that had already been stung, just as the Baudelaires rounded the rocky corner where the swarm had first appeared. Through a worn spot in the fabric, the Baudelaires could just make out a dark, circular hole in the side of the mountain.

"That must be an entrance to one of the caves," Klaus said. "Could we start a fire in there?"

"Maybe," Violet said. "And maybe we'd annoy a hibernating animal."

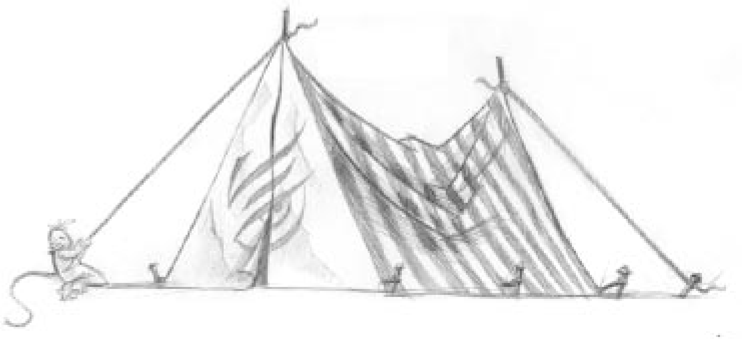
"We've already managed to annoy thousands of animals," Klaus said, almost dropping the pitcher as a gnat stung his wrist. "I don't think we have much choice. I think we have to head into the cave and take our chances."

Violet nodded in agreement, but looked nervously at the entrance to the cave. Taking one's chances is like taking a bath, because sometimes you end up feeling comfortable and warm, and sometimes there is something terrible lurking around that you cannot see until it is too late and you can do nothing else but scream and cling to a plastic duck. The two Baudelaires walked carefully toward the dark, circular hole, making sure to stay clear of the nearby edge of the peak and pulling the coat tightly around them so the snow gnats could not find a way inside, but what worried them most was not the height of the peak or the stingers of the gnats but the chances they were taking as they ducked inside the gloomy entrance of the cave.

The two Baudelaires had never been in this cave before, of course, and as far as I have been able to ascertain, they were never in it again, even on their way back down the mountain, after they had been reunited with their baby sister and learned the secret of Verbal Fridge Dialogue. And yet, as Violet and Klaus took their chances and walked inside, they found two things with which they were familiar. The first was fire. As they stood inside the entrance to the cave, the siblings realized at once that there was no need to worry about the snow gnats any longer, because they could smell nearby smoke, and even see, at a great distance, small orange flames toward the back of the cave. Fire, of course, was very familiar to the children, from the ashen smell of the remains of the Baudelaire mansion to the scent of the flames that destroyed Caligari Carnival. But as the snow gnats formed an arrow and darted away from the cave and the Baudelaires took another step inside, Violet and Klaus found another familiar thing—a familiar person, to be exact, who they had thought they would never see again.

"Hey you cakesniffers!" said a voice from the back of the cave, and the sound was almost enough to make the two Baudelaires wish they had taken their chances someplace else.

CHAPTER
Three



You may well wonder why there has been no account of Sunny Baudelaire in the first two chapters of this book, but there are several reasons why this is so. For one thing, Sunny's journey in Count Olaf's car was much more difficult to research. The tracks made by the tires of the car have vanished long ago, and so many blizzards and avalanches have occurred in the Mortmain Mountains that even the road itself has largely disappeared. The few witnesses to Olaf's journey have mostly died under mysterious circumstances, or were too frightened to answer the letters, telegrams, and greeting cards I sent them requesting an interview. And even the litter that was thrown out the window of Olaf's car—the clearest sign that evil people have driven by—was picked up off the road long before my work began. The missing litter is a good sign, as it indicates that certain animals of the Mortmain Mountains have returned to their posts and are rebuilding their nests, but it has made it very hard for me to write a complete account of Sunny's travels.

But if you are interested in knowing how Sunny Baudelaire spent her time while her siblings stopped the caravan, followed the path of the Stricken Stream, and struggled against the snow gnats, there is another story you might read that describes more or less the same situation. The story concerns a person named Cinderella. Cinderella was a young person who was placed in the care of various wicked people who teased her and forced her to do all the chores. Eventually Cinderella was rescued by her fairy godmother, who magically created a special outfit for Cinderella to wear to a ball where she met a handsome prince, married him soon afterward, and lived happily ever after in a castle. If you substitute the name “Cinderella” with the name “Sunny Baudelaire,” and eliminate the fairy godmother, the special outfit, the ball, the handsome prince, the marriage, and living happily ever after in a castle, you will have a clear idea of Sunny’s predicament.

“I wish the baby orphan would stop that irritating crying,” Count Olaf said, wrinkling his one eyebrow as the car made another violent turn. “Nothing spoils a nice car trip like a whiny kidnapping victim.”

“I’m pinching her as often as I can,” Esmé Squalor said, and gave Sunny another pinch with her stylish fingernails, “but she still won’t shut up.”

“Listen, toothy,” Olaf said, taking his eyes off the road to glare at Sunny. “If you don’t stop crying, I’ll give you something to cry about.”

Sunny gave a little whimper of annoyance, and wiped her eyes with her tiny hands. It was true that she had been crying for most of the day, throughout a long drive that even the most dedicated of researchers would be unable to trace, and now as the sun set, she still had not been able to stop herself. But at Count Olaf’s words, she was almost more irritated than frightened. It is always tedious when someone says that if you don’t stop crying, they will give you something to cry about, because if you are crying than you already have something to cry about, and so there is no reason for them to give you anything additional to cry about, thank you very much. Sunny Baudelaire certainly felt she had sufficient reason to weep. She was worried about her siblings, and wondered how they were going to stop the runaway caravan from hurtling them to their doom. She was frightened for herself, now that Count Olaf had discovered her disguise, torn off her beard, and trapped her on Esmé’s lap. And she was in pain, from the constant pinching of the villain’s girlfriend. “No pinch,” she said to Esmé, but the wicked and stylish woman just frowned as if Sunny had spoken nonsense.

“When she’s not crying,” Esmé said, “the baby talks in some foreign language. I can’t understand a thing she’s saying.”

“Kidnapped children are never any fun,” said the hook-handed man, who was perhaps Sunny’s least favorite of Olaf’s troupe. “Remember when we had the Quagmires in our clutches, boss? They did nothing but complain. They complained when we put them in a cage. They complained when we trapped them inside a fountain. Complain, complain, complain—I was so sick of them I was almost glad when they escaped from our clutches.”

“Glad?” Count Olaf said with a snarl. “We worked hard to steal the Quagmire fortune, and we didn’t get a single sapphire. That was a real waste of time.”

“Don’t blame yourself, Olaf,” said one of the white-faced women from the back seat. “Everybody makes mistakes.”

“Not this time,” Olaf said. “With the two orphans squashed someplace underneath a crashed caravan and the baby orphan on your lap, the Baudelaire fortune is mine. And once we reach the Valley of Four Drafts and find the headquarters, all our worries will be over.”

“Why?” asked Hugo, the hunchbacked man who had previously been employed at the carnival.

“Yes, please explain,” said Kevin, another former carnival worker. At Caligari Carnival, Kevin had been embarrassed to be ambidextrous, but Esmé had lured him into joining Olaf’s troupe by tying Kevin’s right hand behind his back, so no one would know it was as strong as his left. “Remember, boss, we’re new to the troupe, so we don’t always know what’s going on.”

“I remember when I first joined Olaf’s troupe,” the other white-faced woman said. “I’d never even heard of the Snicket file.”

“Working for me is a hands-on learning experience,” Olaf said. “You can’t rely on me to explain everything to you. I’m a very busy man.”

“I’ll explain it, boss,” said the hook-handed man. “Count Olaf, like any good businessman, has committed a wide variety of crimes.”

“But these stupid volunteers have gathered all sorts of evidence and filed it away,” Esmé said. “I tried to explain that crime is very in right now, but apparently they weren’t interested.”

Sunny wiped another tear from her eye and sighed. The youngest Baudelaire thought she’d almost rather be pinched again than hear any more of Esmé Squalor’s nonsense about what was in—the word that Esmé used for “fashionable”—and what was out.

“We need to destroy those files, or Count Olaf could be arrested,” the hook-handed man said. “We have reason to believe that some of the files are at V.F.D. headquarters.”

“What does V.F.D. stand for?” The voice of Colette came from the floor of the automobile. Count Olaf had ordered her to use her skills as a carnival contortionist to curl up at the feet of the other members of the troupe.

“That’s top-secret information!” Olaf growled, to Sunny’s disappointment. “I used to be a member of the organization myself, but I found it was more fun to be an individual practitioner.”

“What does that mean?” asked the hook-handed man.

“It means a life of crime,” Esmé replied. “It’s very in right now.”

“Wrong def.” Sunny could not help speaking through her tears. By “wrong def” she meant something along the lines of, “An individual practitioner means someone who works alone, instead of with a group, and it has nothing to do with a life of crime,” and it made her sad that there was no one around who could understand her.

“There you go, babbling away,” Esmé said. “This is why I never want to have children. Except as servants, of course.”

“This journey is easier than I thought,” Olaf said. “The map says we just have to pass a few more caves.”

“Is there an in hotel near the headquarters?” Esmé asked.

“I’m afraid not, sweetheart,” the villain replied, “but I have two tents in the trunk of the car. We’ll be camping on Mount Fraught, the summit of the Mortmain Mountains.”

“The summit?” Esmé said. “It’ll be cold at the highest peak.”

“It’s true,” Olaf admitted, “but False Spring is on its way, so before long it’ll be a bit warmer.”

“But what about tonight?” Esmé Squalor said. “It is definitely *not* in for me to set up tents in the freezing cold.”

Count Olaf looked at his girlfriend and began to laugh, and Sunny could smell the foul breath of his nasty giggles. “Don’t be silly,” the villain said finally. “*You’re* not going to set up the tents, Esmé. You’re going to stay nice and toasty in the car. The bucktoothed baby will set up the tents for us.”

Now Olaf’s entire troupe laughed, and the car filled with the stench of so many villains’ bad breath. Sunny felt a few more tears roll down her face, and turned to the window so no one would see. The car’s windows were very dirty, but the youngest Baudelaire could see the strange, square peaks of the Mortmain Mountains and the dark waters of the Stricken Stream. By now the car had driven so high up in the mountains that the stream was mostly ice, and Sunny looked at the wide stripe of frozen blackness and wondered where her siblings were, and if they were coming to rescue her. She remembered the other time she had been in Count Olaf’s clutches, when the villain had tied her up, locked her in a cage and dangled her outside his tower room as part of one of his schemes. It had been an absolutely terrifying experience for the youngest Baudelaire, and she often still had nightmares about the creaking of the cage and the distant sight of her two siblings looking up at her from Count Olaf’s backyard. But Violet had built a grappling hook to rescue her, and Klaus had done some important legal research to defeat Olaf’s scheme. As the car took Sunny farther and farther away from her siblings, and she stared out at the lonesome terrain, she knew that they could save her again.

“How long will we stay on Mount Fraught?” Hugo asked.

“Until I say so, of course,” Count Olaf replied.

“You’ll soon find out that much of this job involves a lot of waiting around,” the hook-handed man said. “I usually keep something around to help pass the time, like a deck of cards or a large rock.”

“It can be dull,” admitted one of the white-faced women, “and it can be dangerous. Several of our comrades have recently suffered terrible fates.”

“It was worth it,” Count Olaf said nonchalantly, a word which here means “in a tone of voice that indicated he didn’t care one bit about his deceased employees.” “Sometimes a few people need to die in fires or get eaten by lions, if it’s all for the greater good.”

“What’s the greater good?” asked Colette.

“Money!” Esmé cried in greedy glee. “Money and personal satisfaction, and we’re going to get both of those things out of this whimpering baby on my lap! Once we have our hands on the Baudelaire fortune, we’ll have enough money to live a life of luxury and plan several more treacherous schemes!”

The entire troupe cheered, and Count Olaf gave Sunny a filthy grin, but did not say anything more as the car raced up a steep, bumpy hill, and at last screeched to a halt, just as the last rays of the sun faded into the evening sky. “We’re here at last,” Count Olaf said, and handed the car keys to Sunny. “Get out, baby orphan. Unload everything from the trunk and set up the tents.”

“And bring us some potato chips,” Esmé said, “so we’ll have something in to eat while we wait.”

Esmé opened the door of the car, placed Sunny on the frozen ground, and slammed the door shut again. Instantly, the chilly mountain air surrounded the youngest Baudelaire and made her shiver. It was so bitterly cold at the highest peak of the Mortmain Mountains that her tears froze in their tracks, forming a tiny mask of ice all over her face. Unsteadily, Sunny rose to her feet and walked to the back of the car. She was tempted to keep walking, and escape from Olaf while he waited in the car with his troupe. But where could she go? Sunny looked around at her surroundings and could not see a place where a baby would be safe by herself.

The summit of Mount Fraught was a small, flat square, and as Sunny walked to the trunk of the car, she gazed off each edge of the square, feeling a bit dizzy from the great height. From three of the edges, she could see the square and misty peaks of some of the other mountains, most of which were covered in snow, and twisting through the peaks were the strange, black waters of the Stricken Stream, and the rocky path that the car had driven along. But from the fourth side of the square peak, Sunny saw something so strange it took her a moment to figure out what it was.

Extending from the highest peak in the Mortmain Mountains was a glittering white strip, like an enormous piece of shiny paper folded downward, or the wing of some tremendous bird. Sunny watched the very last rays of the sunset reflect off this enormous surface and slowly realized what it was: the source of the Stricken Stream. Like many streams, the Stricken Stream originated within the rocks of the mountains, and in the warmer season, Sunny could see that it cascaded down from the highest peak in an enormous waterfall. But this was not a warm time of year, and just as Sunny's tears had frozen on her face, the waterfall had frozen solid, into a long, slippery slope that disappeared into the darkness below. It was such an eerie sight that it took Sunny a moment to wonder why the ice was white, instead of black like the waters of the Stricken Stream.

Honk! A loud blast from Count Olaf's horn made Sunny remember what she was supposed to be doing, and she hurriedly opened the trunk and found a bag of potato chips, which she brought back to the car. "That took a very long time, orphan," said Olaf, rather than "Thank you." "Now go set up the tents, one for Esmé and me and one for my troupe, so we can get some sleep."

"Where is the baby going to stay?" asked the hook-handed man. "I don't want her in my tent. I hear that babies can creep up and steal your breath while you're sleeping."

"Well, she's certainly not sleeping with me," Esmé said. "It's not in to have a baby in your tent."

"She's not going to sleep in either tent," Olaf decided. "There's a large covered casserole dish in the trunk. She can sleep in there."

"Will she be safe in a casserole dish?" Esmé said. "Remember, Olaf honey, if she dies then we can't get our hands on the fortune."

"There are a few holes in the top so she can breathe," Olaf said, "and the cover will protect her from the snow gnats."

"Snow gnats?" asked Hugo.

"Snow gnats are well-organized, ill-tempered insects," Count Olaf explained, "who live in cold mountain areas and enjoy stinging people for no reason whatsoever. I've always been fond of them."

"Nonat," Sunny said, which meant "I didn't notice any such insects outside," but no one paid any attention.

"Won't she run away if no one's watching her?" asked Kevin.

"She wouldn't dare," Count Olaf said, "and even if she tried to survive in the mountains by herself, we could see where she went. That's why we're staying here at the summit. We'll know if the brat escapes, or if anyone's coming after us, because we can see everything and everyone for miles and miles."

"Eureka," Sunny said, before she could stop herself. She meant something along the lines of, "I've just realized something," but she had not meant to say it out loud.

"Stop your babbling and get busy, you fanged brat!" Esmé Squalor said, and slammed the car door shut. Sunny could hear the laughing of the troupe and the crunching of potato chips as she walked slowly back to the trunk to find the tents.

It is often quite frustrating to arrange all of the cloth and the poles so that a tent works correctly, which is why I have always preferred to stay in hotels or rented castles, which also have the added attractions of solid walls and maid service. Sunny, of course, had the extra disadvantages of trying to do it herself, in the dark, when she was still fairly new at walking and was worried about her siblings. But the youngest Baudelaire had a history of performing Herculean tasks, a phrase which here means "managing to do incredibly difficult things." As I'm sure you know, if you are ever forced to do something very difficult, it often helps to think of something inspiring to keep you going. When Sunny had engaged in a sword-and-tooth fight at Lucky Smells Lumbermill, for instance, she thought of how much she cared for her siblings, and it helped her defeat the evil Dr. Orwell. When Sunny climbed up an elevator shaft at 667 Dark Avenue, she had concentrated on her friends the Quagmires, and how much she wanted to rescue them, and before too long she had reached the penthouse apartment. So, as Sunny dug a hole in the frozen ground with her teeth so the tent poles would stay in place, she thought of something that inspired her, and oddly enough it was something that Count Olaf had said, about being able to see everything and everyone for miles and miles. As Sunny assembled the tents, and gazed down every so often at the slippery slope of the frozen waterfall, she decided that she would not try to sneak away from Olaf and his troupe. She would not to try to sneak anywhere. Because if you could see everything and everyone from Mount Fraught, that also meant everything and everyone, including Violet and Klaus Baudelaire, would be able to see her.

CHAPTER
Four

That night was a dark day. Of course, all nights are dark days, because night is simply a badly lit version of day, due to the fact that the Earth travels around and around the sun reminding everyone that it is time to get out of bed and start the day with a cup of coffee or a secret message folded up into a paper airplane that can sail out the barred window of a ranger station. But in this case, the phrase “a dark day” means “a sad time in the history of the Baudelaire children, V.F.D., and all kind, brave, and well-read people in the world.” But Violet and Klaus Baudelaire, of course, had no idea of the catastrophe occurring high above them in the Valley of Four Drafts. All they knew was that they were hearing a voice they had hoped never to hear again.

"Go away, cakesniffers!" the voice said. "This is a private cave!"

"Who are you talking to, Carmelita?" asked another voice. This voice was much louder, and sounded like it belonged to a grown man.

"I can see two shadows in the entrance of the cave, Uncle Bruce," said the first voice, "and to me they look like cakesniffers."

The back of the cave echoed with giggling, and Violet and Klaus looked at one another in dismay. The familiar voice belonged to Carmelita Spats, the nasty little girl whom the Baudelaires had encountered at Prufrock Preparatory School. Carmelita had taken an instant dislike to the three siblings, calling them unpleasant names and generally making life miserable at the academy. If you have ever been a student, then you know that there is usually one such person at every school and that once you have graduated you hope never to see them again. The two elder Baudelaires had enough troubles in the Mortmain Mountains without running into this unpleasant person, and at the sound of her voice they almost turned around and took their chances once more with the snow gnats swarming outside.

"Two shadows?" asked the second voice. "Identify yourselves, please."

"We're mountain travelers," Violet called from the entrance. "We lost our way and ran into a swarm of snow gnats. Please let us rest here for a moment, while the smell of smoke scares them away, and then we'll be on our way."

"Absolutely not!" replied Carmelita, who sounded even nastier than usual. "This is where the Snow Scouts are camping, on their way to celebrate False Spring and crown me queen. We don't want any cakesniffers spoiling our fun."

"Now, now, Carmelita," said the voice of the grown man. "Snow Scouts are supposed to be accommodating, remember? It's part of the Snow Scout Alphabet Pledge. And it would be very accommodating of us to offer these strangers the shelter of our cave."

“I don’t want to be accommodating,” Carmelita said. “I’m the False Spring Queen, so I get to do whatever I want.”

“You’re not the False Spring Queen yet, Carmelita,” came the patient voice of a young boy. “Not until we dance around the Springpole. Do come in, travelers, and sit by the fire. We’re happy to accommodate you.”

“That’s the spirit, kid,” said the voice of the grown man. “Come on, Snow Scouts, let’s all say the Snow Scout Alphabet Pledge together.”

Instantly the cave echoed with the sound of many voices speaking in perfect unison, a phrase which here means “reciting a list of very odd words at the very same time.” “Snow Scouts,” recited the Snow Scouts, “are accommodating, basic, calm, darling, emblematic, frisky, grinning, human, innocent, jumping, kept, limited, meek, nap-loving, official, pretty, quarantined, recent, scheduled, tidy, understandable, victorious, wholesome, xylophone, young, and zippered—every morning, every afternoon, every night, and all day long!”

The two Baudelaires looked at one another in confusion. Like many pledges, the Snow Scout Alphabet Pledge had not made much sense, and Violet and Klaus tried to imagine how a scout could be “calm” and “meek” at the same time as being “frisky” and “jumping,” or how all these children could avoid being “young” or “human,” even if they wanted to. They couldn’t figure out why the pledge suggested being all these things “every morning,” “every afternoon,” and “every night,” and then added “all day long,” or why the word “xylophone” appeared in the pledge at all. But they did not have much time to wonder, because when the pledge was over, the Snow Scouts all took a big breath and made a long, airy sound, as if they were imitating the wind outside, and this seemed even more strange.

“That’s my favorite part,” said the voice of the grown man, when the sound faded away. “There’s nothing like ending the Snow Scout Alphabet Pledge with a snowy sound. Now approach, travelers, so we can get a look at you.”

“Let’s keep the coat over our faces,” Klaus whispered to his sister. “Carmelita might recognize us.”

“And the other scouts have probably seen our pictures in *The Daily Punctilio,*” Violet said, and ducked her head underneath the coat. *The Daily Punctilio* was a newspaper that had published a story blaming the three Baudelaires for Jacques Snicket’s murder. The story was utter nonsense, of course, but it seemed that everyone in the world had believed it and was searching for the Baudelaires to put them in jail. As the two siblings walked toward the voices of the Snow Scouts, however, they realized that they weren’t the only ones concealing their faces.

The back of the cave was like a large, circular room, with very high ceilings and craggy walls of rock that flickered in the orange light of the flames. Seated in a circle around the fire were fifteen or twenty people, all looking up at the two Baudelaires. Through the fabric of the coat, the children could see that one person was much taller than the others—this was probably Bruce—and was wearing an ugly plaid coat and holding a large cigar. On the opposite side of the circle was someone wearing a thick wool sweater with several large pockets, and the rest of the Snow Scouts were wearing bright white uniforms with enormous zippers down the front and emblems of snowflakes, in all different sizes and shapes, along the long, puffy sleeves. On the back of the uniforms, the Baudelaires could see the words of the Snow Scout Alphabet Pledge printed in large pink letters, and on the top of everyone’s heads were white headbands with tiny plastic snowflakes sticking out of the top in all directions and the word “Brr!” written in icy script. But Violet and Klaus weren’t looking at the plastic flurries of snow on the Snow Scouts’ heads, or the accommodating, basic, calm, darling, emblematic, frisky, grinning, human, innocent, jumping, kept, limited, meek, nap-loving, official, pretty, quarantined, recent, scheduled, tidy, understandable, victorious, wholesome, xylophone, young, and zippered uniforms that most everyone was wearing. They were looking at the dark, round masks that were covering the scouts’ faces. The masks were covered in tiny holes, much like masks worn for fencing, a sport in which people swordfight for fun rather than for honor or in order to rescue a writer who has been taped to the wall. But in the flickering light of the cave, the Baudelaires could not see the holes, and it looked like the faces of Bruce and the Snow Scouts had vanished, leaving a dark and empty hole above their necks.

"You cakesniffers look ridiculous," said one of the scouts, and the Baudelaires knew at once which masked figure was Carmelita Spats. "Your faces are all covered up."

"We're meek," Violet said, thinking quickly. "In fact, we're so meek that we hardly ever show our faces."

"Then you'll fit in just fine," said Bruce from behind his mask. "The name's Bruce, but you can call me Uncle Bruce, although I'm almost certainly not your real uncle. Welcome to the Snow Scouts, travelers, where all of us are meek. In fact, we're accommodating, basic, calm…"

The other Snow Scouts all joined in the pledge, and the two elder Baudelaires stood through another rendition of the absurd list, while the scout in the sweater stood up and stepped toward them. "We have some spare masks over there," he murmured quietly, and gestured toward a large pile of equipment, stacked beside a very long wooden pole. "They'll keep the snow gnats away when you go back outside. Help yourself."

"Thank you," Violet replied, as the scouts promised to be kept, limited, and meek. She and her brother quickly grabbed masks and put them on underneath the coat, so that by the time the scouts vowed to be xylophone, young, and zippered, they looked as faceless as everyone else in the cave.

"That was fun, kids," said Bruce, as the snowy sound faded and the pledge was over. "Now why don't you two join the Snow Scouts? We're an organization for young people to have fun and learn new things. Right now we're on a Snow Scout Hike. We're going to hike all the way up to Mount Fraught in order to celebrate False Spring."

"What's False Spring?" Violet asked, sitting down between her brother and the sweatered scout.

"Anybody who's not a cakesniffer knows what False Spring is," Carmelita said in a scornful voice. "It's when the weather gets unusually warm before getting very cold again. We celebrate it with a fancy dance where we spin around and around the Springpole." She pointed to the wooden pole, and the Baudelaires noticed that the Snow Scouts all wore bright white mittens, each emblazoned with an S. “When the dance is over, we choose the best Snow Scout and crown her the False Spring Queen. This time, it’s me. In fact, it’s always me.”

“That’s because Uncle Bruce is really your uncle,” said one of the other Snow Scouts.

“No, it’s not,” Carmelita insisted. “It’s because I’m the most accommodating, basic, calm, darling, emblematic, frisky, grinning, human, innocent, jumping, kept, limited, meek, nap-loving, official, pretty, quarantined, recent, scheduled, tidy, understandable, victorious, wholesome, xylophone, young, and zippered.”

“How can anyone be ‘xylophone’?” Klaus couldn’t help asking. “‘Xylophone’ isn’t even an adjective.”

“Uncle Bruce couldn’t think of another word that began with X,” explained the sweatered Snow Scout, in a tone of voice indicating that he thought this wasn’t a very good excuse.

“How about ‘xenial’?” Klaus suggested. “It’s a word that means—”

“You can’t change the words of the Snow Scout Alphabet Pledge,” Bruce interrupted, moving his cigar toward his face as if he were going to try to smoke it through the mask. “The whole point of the Snow Scouts is that you do the same thing over and over. We celebrate False Spring over and over, on Mount Fraught, at the source of the Stricken Stream. My niece Carmelita Spats is False Spring Queen, over and over. And over and over, we stop here in this cave for Snow Scout Story Time.”

“I read that the caves of the Mortmain Mountains contained hibernating animals,” Klaus said. “Are you sure it’s safe to stop here?”

The Snow Scout who was wearing a sweater instead of a uniform turned his head quickly to the Baudelaires, as if he was going to speak, but Bruce answered first. “It’s safe now, kid,” he said. “Years ago, apparently these mountains were crawling with bears. The bears were so intelligent that they were trained as soldiers. But they disappeared and no one knows why.”

“Not bears,” the scout in the sweater said, so quietly that the two Baudelaires had to lean in to hear him. “Lions lived in these caves. And they weren’t soldiers. The lions were detectives—volunteer feline detectives.” He turned so his mask was facing the two siblings, and the children knew he must be staring at them through the holes. “Volunteer Feline Detectives,” he said again, and the Baudelaires almost gasped.

“Did you say—” Violet said, but the sweatered Snow Scout shook his head as if it was not safe to talk. Violet looked at her brother and then at the scout, wishing she could see both of their faces behind their masks. The initials of “Volunteer Feline Detectives,” of course, spelled “V.F.D.,” the name of the organization they were looking for. But were these initials a coincidence, as they had seemed to be so many times? Or was this mysterious scout giving them some sort of signal?

“I don’t know what you kids are muttering about,” Bruce said, “but stop it this instant. It’s not time for conversation. It’s Snow Scout Story Time, when one Snow Scout tells a story to the other Snow Scouts. Then we’ll all eat marshmallows until we feel sick and go to sleep on a heap of blankets, just like we do every year. Why don’t our new scouts tell the first story?”

“I should tell the first story,” whined Carmelita. “After all, I’m the False Spring Queen.”

“But I’m sure the travelers will have a wonderful story to tell,” the sweatered scout said. “I’d love to hear a Very Fascinating Drama.”

Klaus saw his sister raise her hands to her head and smiled. He knew Violet had instinctively begun to tie her hair up in a ribbon to help her think, but it was impossible to do so with a mask on. Both the Baudelaire minds were racing to figure out a way to communicate with this mysterious scout, and the children were so lost in thought that they scarcely heard Carmelita Spats insulting them.

“Stop sitting around, cakesniffers,” Carmelita said. “If you’re going to tell us a story, get started.”

“I’m sorry for the delay,” Violet said, choosing her words as carefully as she could. “We haven’t had a Very Fun Day, so it’s difficult to think of a good story.”

“I didn’t realize this was a sad occasion,” said the sweatered scout.

“Oh, yes,” Klaus said. “We’ve had nothing to eat all day except for some Vinegar-Flavored Doughnuts.”

“And then there were the snow gnats,” Violet said. “They behaved like Violent Frozen Dragonflies.”

“When they form an arrow,” Klaus said, “they’re more like a Voracious Fierce Dragon.”

“Or a Vain Fat Dictator, I imagine,” the scout in the sweater said, and gave the Baudelaires a masked nod as if he had received their message.

“This is the most boring story I have ever heard,” Carmelita Spats said. “Uncle Bruce, tell these two that they’re both cakesniffers.”

“Well, it wouldn’t be very accommodating to say so,” Bruce said, “but I must admit that the story you were telling was a little dull, kids. When Snow Scouts tell stories, they skip everything boring and only tell the interesting parts. That way, the story can be as accommodating, basic, calm, darling, emblematic, frisky, grinning, human, innocent, jumping, kept, limited, meek, nap-loving, official, pretty, quarantined, recent, scheduled, tidy, understandable, victorious, wholesome, xylophone, young, and zippered as possible.”

“I’ll show these cakesniffers how to tell an interesting story,” Carmelita said. “Once upon a time, I woke up and looked in the mirror, and there I saw the prettiest, smartest, most darling girl in the whole wide world. I put on a lovely pink dress to make myself look even prettier, and I skipped off to school where my teacher told me I looked more adorable than anyone she had ever seen in her entire life, and she gave me a lollipop as a special present…”

At this point, I will take a page from someone's book, a phrase which here means "adopt an idea used by somebody else." If, for instance, a man told you that the best way to write thank-you notes is to reward yourself with a cookie every time you finished one, you might take a page from his book, and have a plate of cookies nearby after your birthday or some other gift-giving occasion. If a girl told you that the best way to sneak out of the house late at night is to make sure everyone else is sound asleep, you might take a page from her book and mix a sleeping potion into everyone else's afterdinner coffee before climbing down the ivy that grows outside your bedroom window. And if you have been reading this miserable story, then the next time you find yourself in a similar situation, you might take a page from *The Slippery Slope* and use a combination of sticky substances and a drag chute to slow down a racing caravan, and then retrieve several articles of heavy clothing in order to protect yourself from the cold, and find a cave full of Snow Scouts gathered around a fire when the snow gnats begin to swarm.

But I will be taking a page from Bruce's book, when he suggested that a storyteller only tell the interesting parts of the story and skip everything boring. Certainly the two elder Baudelaires wished they could skip this boring part of their own story, as they were very eager to leave the cave and resume their search for their sister. But Violet and Klaus knew that they shouldn't leave the cave until they could talk to the mysterious boy in the sweater, and that they couldn't talk to the mysterious boy in the sweater in front of Bruce and the other Snow Scouts, and so they sat by the fire as Carmelita Spats talked on and on about how pretty and smart and darling she was and how everyone she met told her that she was unbelievably adorable. Although the Baudelaires had to sit through these tedious portions of their story, there is no reason for you to do so, and so I will skip ahead, past the tiresome details of Carmelita's endless story, and the senseless pledge that Bruce made everyone say several more times, and the all-marshmallow meal that the scouts shared with the two siblings. I will skip how irksome it was for Violet and Klaus to turn away from the scouts, quickly lift their masks, and pop marshmallows into their mouths before covering their faces again so they would not be recognized. After their long, tiring journey, the children would have preferred a more substantial supper and a less complicated way of eating it, but the siblings could not skip these parts of their story, so they had to wait for the evening to pass and for all the other Snow Scouts to feel sick and arrange blankets into a large heap beside the Springpole. Even when Bruce led the Snow Scouts in one more alphabet pledge as a way of saying good night, Violet and Klaus dared not get up and talk to the sweatered scout for fear of being overheard, and they had to wait for hours, too curious and anxious to sleep, as the fire died down and the cave echoed with the sounds of Snow Scout snoring. But I will take a page from the book of the Snow Scout leader, and skip ahead to the next interesting thing that happened, which was very, very late at night, when so many interesting parts of stories happen and so many people miss them because they are asleep in their beds, or hiding in the broom closet of a mustard factory, disguised as a dustpan to fool the night watchwoman.

It was very late at night—in fact one might say that it was the darkest part of this dark day—and it was so late that the Baudelaires had almost given up on staying awake, particularly after such an exhausting day, but just as the two siblings were beginning to fall asleep, they each felt a hand touch them on the shoulder, and they quickly sat up and found themselves looking into the masked face of the sweatered scout.

“Come with me, Baudelaires,” the boy said in a very quiet voice. “I know a shortcut to the headquarters,” and this was an interesting part of the story indeed.

CHAPTER
Five

When you have many questions on your mind, and you suddenly have an opportunity to ask them, the questions tend to crowd together and trip over one another, much like passengers on a crowded train when it reaches a popular station. With Bruce and the Snow Scouts asleep, the two elder Baudelaires finally had an opportunity to talk with the mysterious scout in the sweater, but everything they wanted to ask seemed hopelessly entangled.

“How—” Violet started, but the question “How did you know we were the Baudelaires?” stumbled against the question “Who are you?” and fell back against the questions “Are you a member of V.F.D.?” and “What does V.F.D. stand for?”

“Do—” Klaus said, but the question “Do you know where our sister is?” tripped over the question “Do you know if one of our parents is alive?” which was already struggling with “How can we get to the headquarters?” and “Will my sisters and I ever find a safe place to live without constantly being threatened by Count Olaf and his troupe as they hatch plan after plan to steal the Baudelaire fortune?” although the middle Baudelaire knew that his last question was unlikely to be answered at all.

“I’m sure you have lots of questions,” the boy whispered, “but we can’t talk here. Bruce is a light sleeper, and he’s caused V.F.D. enough trouble already without learning another of our secrets. I promise all your questions will be answered, but first we’ve got to get to the headquarters. Come with me.”

Without another word, the sweatered scout turned around, and the Baudelaires saw he was wearing a backpack inscribed with an insignia they had seen at Caligari Carnival. At first glance, this insignia merely appeared to be an eye, but the children had discovered that if you looked closely you could see the initials V.F.D. cleverly hidden in the drawing. The scout began to walk, and the two siblings got out of their blankets as quietly as they could and followed him. To their surprise, he did not lead them toward the cave entrance, but to the back of the cave, where the Snow Scouts’ fire had been. Now it was nothing more than a pile of gray ashes, although it was still very warm, and the smell of smoke was still in the air. The sweatered scout reached into his pocket and brought out a flashlight. “I had to wait for the fire to die down before I showed you,” he said, and with a nervous glance at the sleeping scouts, turned the flashlight on and shone it above them. “Look.”

Violet and Klaus looked, and saw that there was a hole in the ceiling, big enough for a person to crawl through. The last wisps of smoke from the fire were floating up into the hole. “A chimney,” Klaus murmured. “I was wondering why the fire didn’t fill the cave with smoke.”

“The official name is Vertical Flame Diversion,” the scout whispered. “It serves as a chimney and as a secret passageway. It runs from this cave to the Valley of Four Drafts. If we climb up there, we can reach headquarters within hours, instead of hiking all the way up the mountain. Years ago, there was a metal pole that ran down the center of the hole, so people could slide down and hide in this cave in case of an emergency. The pole is gone now, but there should be carved toeholds in the sides to climb all the way up.” He shone the flashlight on the cave wall, and sure enough, the Baudelaires could see two rows of small carved holes, perfect for sticking one’s feet and hands into.

“How do you know all this?” Violet asked.

The scout looked at her for a moment, and it seemed to the Baudelaires that he was smiling behind his mask. “I read it,” he said, “in a book called

Remarkable Phenomena of the Mortmain Mountains."

"That sounds familiar," Klaus said.

"It should," the scout replied. "I borrowed it from Dr. Montgomery's library."

Dr. Montgomery was one of the Baudelaires' first guardians, and at the mention of his name Violet and Klaus found they had several more questions they wanted to ask.

"When—" Violet started.

"Why—" Klaus started.

"Carm—" Another voice startled the Baudelaires and the scout—the voice of Bruce, waking up halfway at the sound of the conversation. All three children froze for a moment, as Bruce turned over on his blanket, and with a long sigh, went back to sleep.

"We'll talk when we reach the headquarters," the scout whispered. "The Vertical Flame Diversion is very echoey, so we'll have to be absolutely silent as we climb, or the echoing noise will alert Bruce and the Snow Scouts. It'll be very dark inside, so you'll have to feel against the wall for the footholds, and the air will be smoky, but if you keep your masks on they'll filter the air and make it easier to breathe. I'll go first and lead the way. Are you ready?"

Violet and Klaus turned toward one another. Even though they could not see each other's faces through the masks, both siblings knew that they were not at all ready. Following a complete stranger into a secret passageway through the center of the mountains, toward a headquarters they could not even be sure existed, did not seem like a very safe thing to do. The last time they had agreed to take a risky journey, their baby sister had been snatched away from them. What would happen this time, when they were all alone with a mysterious masked figure in a dark and smoky hole?

“I know it must be hard to trust me, Baudelaires,” said the sweatered scout, “after so many people have done you wrong.”

“Can you give us a reason to trust you?” Violet said.

The scout looked down for a moment, and then turned his mask to face both Baudelaires. “One of you mentioned the word ‘xenial,’” he said, “when you were talking with Bruce about that silly pledge. ‘Xenial’ is a word which refers to the giving of gifts to a stranger.”

“He’s right,” Klaus murmured to his sister.

“I know that having a good vocabulary doesn’t guarantee that I’m a good person,” the boy said. “But it does mean I’ve read a great deal. And in my experience, well-read people are less likely to be evil.”

Violet and Klaus looked at one another through their masks. Neither of them were entirely convinced by what the masked scout had said. There are, of course, plenty of evil people who have read a great many books, and plenty of very kind people who seem to have found some other method of spending their time. But the Baudelaires knew that there was a kind of truth to the boy’s statement, and they had to admit that they preferred to take their chances with a stranger who knew what the word “xenial” meant, rather than exiting the cave and trying to find the headquarters all by themselves. So the siblings turned back to the scout, nodded their masks, and followed him to the footholds in the wall, making sure they still had all the items from the caravan with them. The footholds were surprisingly easy to use, and in a short time the Baudelaires were following the mysterious scout into the dark and smoky entrance of the passageway.

The Vertical Flame Diversion that connected the Mortmain Mountain headquarters to this particular Volunteer Feline Detectives cave was once one of the most heavily guarded secrets in the world. Anyone who wanted to use it had to correctly answer a series of questions concerning the force of gravity, the habits of carnivorous beasts, and the central themes of Russian novels, so very few people even knew the passageway’s exact whereabouts. Until the two Baudelaires’ journey, the passageway had not been used for many years, ever since one of my comrades removed the pole in order to use it in the construction of a submarine. So it would be accurate to say that the Vertical Flame Diversion was a road less traveled—even less traveled than the path through the Mortmain Mountains on which this book began.

While the elder Baudelaires had a very good reason to be on the road less traveled, as they were in a great hurry to reach the headquarters and rescue their sister from the clutches of Count Olaf, there is no reason whatsoever why you should be on the road less traveled and choose to read the rest of this woeful chapter, which describes their dark and smoky journey. The ashen air from the Snow Scouts' fire was difficult to breathe, even through the masks, and Violet and Klaus had to struggle not to cough, knowing that the coughing sound would echo down the passageway and wake up Bruce, but there is no reason for you to struggle through my dismal description of this problem. A number of spiders had noticed the footholds were not being used lately, and had moved in and converted them into spider condominiums, but you are under no obligation to read what happens when spiders are suddenly woken up by the sudden appearance of a climbing foot in their new homes. And as the Baudelaires followed the scout farther and farther up, the strong freezing winds from the top of the mountain would rush through the passageway, and all three youngsters would cling to the footholds with their very lives, hoping that the wind would not blow them back down to the cave floor, but although the Baudelaires found it necessary to keep climbing through the rest of the dark day so they could reach the headquarters as quickly as possible, and I find it necessary to finish describing it, so my account of the Baudelaire case is as accurate and as complete as possible, it is not necessary for you to finish reading the rest of this chapter, so you can be as miserable as possible. My description of the Baudelaires' journey up through the road less traveled begins on the next page, but I beg you not to travel along with them. Instead, you may take a page from Bruce's book, and skip ahead to Chapter Six, and find my report on Sunny Baudelaire's tribulations—a word which here means "opportunities to eavesdrop while cooking for a theater troupe"—with Count Olaf, or you may skip ahead to Chapter Seven, when the elder Baudelaires arrive at the site of the V.F.D. headquarters and unmask the stranger who led them there, or you may take the road very frequently traveled and skip away from this book altogether, and find something better to do with your time besides finishing this unhappy tale and becoming a weary, weeping, and well-read person.

The Baudelaires' journey up the Vertical Flame Diversion was so dark and treacherous that it is not enough to write "The Baudelaires' journey up the Vertical Flame Diversion was so dark and treacherous that it is not enough to write 'The Baudelaires' journey up the Vertical Flame Diversion was so dark and treacherous that it is not enough to write "The Baudelaires' journey up the Vertical Flame Diversion was so dark and treacherous that it is not enough to write 'The Baudelaires' journey up the Vertical Flame Diversion was so dark and treacherous that it is not enough to write "*My dear sister,* I am taking a great risk in hiding a letter to you inside one of my books, but I am certain that even the most melancholy and well-read people in the world have found my account of the lives of the three Baudelaire children even more wretched than I had promised, and so this book will stay on the shelves of libraries, utterly ignored, waiting for you to open it and find this message. As an additional precaution, I placed a warning that the rest of this chapter contains a description of the Baudelaires' miserable journey up the Vertical Flame Diversion, so anyone who has the courage to read such a description is probably brave enough to read my letter to you.

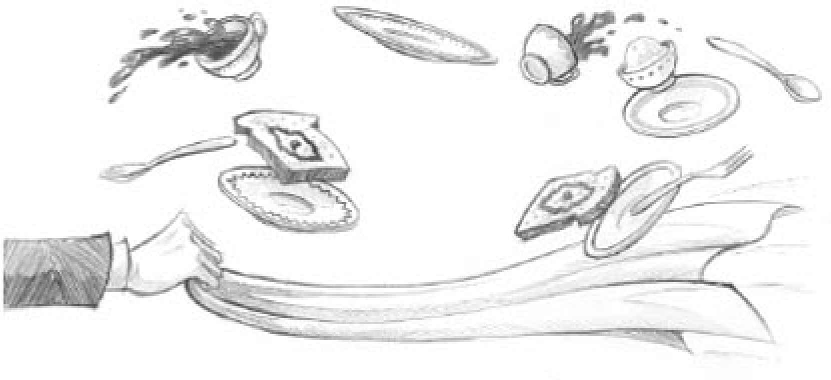
I have at last learned the whereabouts of the evidence that will exonerate me, a phrase which here means "prove to the authorities that it is Count Olaf, and not me, who has started so many fires." Your suggestion, so many years ago at that picnic, that a tea set would be a handy place to hide anything important and small in the event of a dark day, has turned out to be correct. (Incidentally, your other picnic suggestion, that a simple combination of sliced mango, black beans, and chopped celery mixed with black pepper, lime juice, and olive oil would make a delicious chilled salad also turned out to be correct.)

I am on my way now to the Valley of Four Drafts, in order to continue my research on the Baudelaire case. I hope also to retrieve the aforementioned evidence at last. It is too late to restore my happiness, of course, but at least I can clear my name. From the site of V.F.D. headquarters, I will head straight for the Hotel Denouement. I should arrive by—well, it wouldn't be wise to type the date, but it should be easy for you to remember Beatrice’s birthday. Meet me at the hotel. Try to get us a room without ugly curtains.

With all due respect,
Lemony Snicket
Lemony Snicket

P.S. If you substitute the chopped celery with hearts of palm, it is equally delicious.

CHAPTER
Six



In the very early hours of the morning, while the two elder Baudelaires struggled to find their footing as they climbed up the Vertical Flame Diversion—and I sincerely hope that you did not read the description of that journey—the youngest Baudelaire found herself struggling with a different sort of footing altogether. Sunny had not enjoyed the long, cold night on Mount Fraught. If you have ever slept in a covered casserole dish on the highest peak of a mountain range, then you know that it is an uncomfortable place to lay one's head, even if you find a dishtowel inside it that can serve as a blanket. All night long, the chilly mountain winds blew through the tiny holes inside the top of the cover, making it so cold inside the dish that Sunny's enormous teeth chattered all night, giving her tiny cuts on her lips and making such a loud noise that it was impossible to sleep. Finally, when the first rays of the morning sun shone through the holes and made it warm enough to doze, Count Olaf left his tent and kicked open the cover of the dish to begin ordering Sunny around. "Wake up, you dentist's nightmare!" he cried. Sunny opened one exhausted eye and found herself staring at the villain's footing, particularly the tattoo on Olaf's left ankle, a sight that was enough to make her wish her eyes were still closed.

Tattooed on Olaf’s ankle was the image of an eye, and it seemed to Sunny that this eye had been watching the Baudelaires throughout all of their troubles, from the day on Briny Beach when they learned of the terrible fire that destroyed their home. Time after time, Count Olaf had tried to hide this eye so the authorities would not recognize him, so the children were always uncovering it from behind his ridiculous disguises, and the Baudelaires had begun seeing the eye in other places, such as at the office of an evil hypnotist, on the side of a carnival tent, on Esmé Squalor’s purse, and on a necklace owned by a mysterious fortune-teller. It was almost as if this eye had replaced the eyes of their parents, but instead of keeping watch over the children and making sure that they were safe from harm, this eye merely gave them a blank stare, as if it did not care about the children’s troubles, or could do nothing about them. If you looked very closely, you could find the letters V.F.D. half-hidden in the eye, and this reminded Sunny of all the sinister secrets that surrounded the three siblings, and how far they were from understanding the web of mystery in which they found themselves. But it is hard to think about mysteries and secrets first thing in the morning, particularly if someone is yelling at you, and Sunny turned her attention to what her captor was saying.

“You’ll be doing all the cooking and cleaning for us, orphan,” Count Olaf said, “and you can start by making us breakfast. We have a big day ahead of us, and a good breakfast will give me and my troupe the energy we need to perform unspeakable crimes.”

“Plakna?” Sunny asked, which meant “How am I supposed to cook breakfast on the top of a freezing mountain?” but Count Olaf just gave her a nasty smile.

“Too bad your brain isn’t as big as your teeth, you little monkey,” he said. “You’re talking nonsense, as usual.”

Sunny sighed, frustrated that there was no one on top of the Mortmain Mountains who understood what she was trying to say. “Translo,” she said, which meant “Just because you don’t understand something doesn’t mean that it’s nonsense.”

“There you go, babbling again,” Olaf said, and tossed Sunny the car keys. “Get the groceries out of the trunk of the car and get to work.”

Sunny suddenly thought of something that might cheer her up a little bit. “Sneakitawc,” she said, which was her way of saying “Of course, because you don’t understand me, I can say anything I want to you, and you’ll have no idea what I’m talking about.”

“I’m getting quite tired of your ridiculous speech impediment,” Count Olaf said.

“Brummel,” Sunny said, which meant “In my opinion, you desperately need a bath, and your clothing is a shambles.”

“Be quiet this instant,” Olaf ordered.

“Busheney,” Sunny said, which meant something along the lines of, “You’re an evil man with no concern whatsoever for other people.”

“Shut up!” Count Olaf roared. “Shut up and get cooking!”

Sunny got out of the casserole dish and stood up, looking down at the snowy ground so the villain would not see she was smiling. It is not nice to tease people, of course, but the youngest Baudelaire felt that it was all right to enjoy a joke at the expense of such a murderous and evil man, and she walked to Olaf’s car with a spring in her step, a phrase which here means “in a surprisingly cheerful manner considering she was in the clutches of a ruthless villain on top of a mountain so cold that even the nearby waterfall was frozen solid.”

But when Sunny Baudelaire opened the trunk of the car her smile faded. Under normal circumstances, it is not safe to keep groceries in the trunk of a car for an extended period of time, because some foods will spoil without being refrigerated. But Sunny saw that the temperatures of the Mortmain Mountains had caused the groceries to become over-refrigerated. A thin layer of frost covered every item, and Sunny had to crawl inside and wipe the frost off with her bare hands to see what she might make for the troupe. There was a variety of well-chilled food that Olaf had stolen from the carnival, but none of it seemed like the makings of a good breakfast. There was a bag of coffee beans beneath a harpoon gun and a frozen hunk of spinach, but there was no way to grind the beans into tiny pieces to make coffee. Near a picnic basket and a large bag of mushrooms was a jug of orange juice, but it had been close to one of the bullet holes in the trunk, and so had frozen completely solid in the cold. And after Sunny moved aside three chunks of cold cheese, a large can of water chestnuts, and an eggplant as big as herself, she finally found a small jar of boysenberry jam, and a loaf of bread she could use to make toast, although it was so cold it felt more like a log than a breakfast ingredient.

"Wake up!" Sunny peeked out of the trunk and saw Count Olaf calling through the door of one of the tents she had assembled. "Wake up and get dressed for breakfast!"

"Can't we sleep ten minutes more?" asked the whiny voice of the hook-handed man. "I was having a lovely dream about sneezing without covering my nose and mouth, and giving everybody germs."

"Absolutely not!" Olaf replied. "I have lots of work for you to do."

"But Olaf," said Esmé Squalor, emerging from the tent she had shared with Count Olaf. Her hair was in curlers and she was wearing a long robe and a pair of fuzzy slippers. "I need a little while to choose what I'm going to wear. It's not in to burn down a headquarters without wearing a fashionable outfit."

Sunny gasped in the trunk. She had known that Olaf was eager to reach the V.F.D. headquarters as soon as possible, in order to get his hands on the rest of some crucial evidence, but it had not occurred to her that he would combine this evidence-grabbing with his usual pyromania, a word which here means "a love of fire, usually the product of a deranged mind."

"I can't imagine why you need all this time," was Count Olaf's grumpy reply to his girlfriend. "After all, I wear the same outfit for weeks at a time, except when I'm in disguise, and I look almost unbearably handsome. Well, I suppose you have a few minutes before breakfast is ready. Slow service is one of the disadvantages of having infants for slaves." Olaf strode over to the car and peered in at Sunny, who was still clutching the loaf of bread.

"Hurry up, bigmouth," he growled at Sunny. "I need a nice hot meal to take the chill out of the morning."

"Unfeasi!" Sunny cried. By "Unfeasi" she meant "To make a hot meal without any electricity, I'd need a fire, and expecting a baby to start a fire all by herself on top of a snowy mountain is cruelly impossible and impossibly cruel," but Olaf merely frowned.

"Your baby talk is really beginning to annoy me," he said.

"Hygiene," Sunny said, to make herself feel better. She meant something along the lines of, "Additionally, you ought to be ashamed of yourself for wearing the same outfit for weeks at a time without washing," but Olaf merely scowled at her and walked back into his tent.

Sunny looked at the cold ingredients and tried to think. Even if she had been old enough to start a fire by herself, Sunny had been nervous around flames since the fire that had destroyed the Baudelaire mansion. But as she thought of the fire that destroyed her own home, she remembered something her mother had told her once. They had both been busy in the kitchen—Sunny's mother was busy preparing for a fancy luncheon, and Sunny was busy dropping a fork on the floor over and over again to see what sort of sound it made. The luncheon was due to start any minute, and Sunny's mother was quickly mixing up a salad of sliced mango, black beans, and chopped celery mixed with black pepper, lime juice, and olive oil. "This isn't a very complicated recipe, Sunny," her mother had said, "but if I arrange the salad very nicely on fancy plates, people will think I've been cooking all day. Often, when cooking, the presentation of the food can be as important as the food itself." Thinking of what her mother had said, she opened the picnic basket in Olaf's trunk and found that it contained a set of elegant plates, each emblazoned with the familiar eye insignia, and a small tea set. Then she rolled up her sleeves—an expression which here means "focused very hard on the task at hand, but did not actually roll up her sleeves, because it was very cold on the highest peak of the Mortmain

Mountains"—and got to work as Count Olaf and his comrades started their day.

"I'll use these blankets for a tablecloth," Sunny heard Olaf say in the tent, over the sound her own teeth were making.

"Good idea," she heard Esmé reply. "It's very in to dine *al fresco*."

"What does that mean?" Olaf asked.

"It means 'outside,' of course," Esmé explained. "It's fashionable to eat your meals in the fresh air."

"I knew what it meant," Count Olaf replied. "I was just testing you."

"Hey boss," Hugo called from the next tent. "Colette won't share the dental floss."

"There's no reason to use dental floss," Count Olaf said, "unless you're trying to strangle someone with a very weak neck."

"Kevin, would you do me a favor?" the hook-handed man asked, as Sunny struggled to open the jug of juice. "Will you help me comb my hair? These hooks can make it difficult sometimes."

"I'm jealous of your hooks," Kevin replied. "Having no hands is better than having two equally strong hands."

"Don't be ridiculous," one of the white-faced women replied. "Having a white face is worse than both of your situations."

"But you have a white face because you put makeup on," Colette said, as Sunny climbed back out of the trunk and knelt down in the snow. "You're putting powder on your face right now."

"Must you bicker every single morning?" Count Olaf asked, and stomped back out of his tent carrying a blanket covered in images of eyes. "Somebody take this blanket and set the table over there on that flat rock."

Hugo walked out of the tent and smiled at his new boss. “I’d be happy to,” he said.

Esmé stepped outside, having changed into a bright red snowsuit, and put her arm around Olaf. “Fold the blanket into a large triangle,” she said to Hugo. “That’s the in way to do it.”

“Yes ma’am,” Hugo said, “and, if you don’t mind my saying so, that’s a very handsome snowsuit you are wearing.”

The villainous girlfriend turned all the way around to show off her outfit from every angle. Sunny looked up from her cooking and noticed that the letter B was sewn onto the back of it, along with the eye insignia. “I’m glad you like it, Hugo,” Esmé said. “It’s stolen.”

Count Olaf glanced at Sunny and quickly stepped in front of his girlfriend. “What are you staring at, toothy?” he asked. “Are you done making breakfast?”

“Almost,” Sunny replied.

“That infant never makes any sense,” Hugo said. “No wonder she fooled us into thinking she was a carnival freak.”

Sunny sighed, but no one heard her over the scornful laughter of Olaf’s troupe. One by one, the villain’s wretched employees emerged from the tent and strolled over to the flat rock where Hugo was laying out the blanket. One of the white-faced women glanced at Sunny and gave her a small smile, but nobody offered to help her finish with the breakfast preparations, or even to set the table with the eye-patterned dishes. Instead, they gathered around the rock talking and laughing until Sunny carefully carried the breakfast over to them, arranged on a large eye-shaped tray that she’d found in the bottom of the picnic basket. Although she was still frightened to be in Olaf’s clutches and worried about her siblings, Sunny could not help but be a little proud as Count Olaf and his comrades looked at the meal she had prepared.

Sunny had kept in mind what her mother had said about presentation being as important as the food itself, and managed to put together a lovely breakfast despite the difficult circumstances. First, she had opened the jug of frozen orange juice and used a small spoon to chip away at the ice until she had a large heap of juice shavings, which she arranged into tiny piles on each plate to make orange granita, a cold and delicious concoction that is often served at fancy dinner parties and masked balls. Then, Sunny had rinsed her mouth out with melted snow so it would be as clean as possible, and chopped some of the coffee beans with her teeth. She placed a bit of the ground coffee inside each cup and combined it with more snow she had melted in her own hands to make iced coffee, a delicious beverage I first enjoyed when visiting Thailand to interview a taxi driver. Meanwhile, the youngest Baudelaire had put the chilled bread underneath her shirt to warm it up, and when it was warm enough to eat she put one slice on each plate, and using a small spoon, spread some boysenberry jam on each piece of bread. She did her best to spread the jam in the shape of an eye, to please the villains who would be eating it, and as a finishing touch she found a bouquet of ivy, which Count Olaf had given his girlfriend not so long ago, and placed it in the small pitcher of the tea set used for cream. There was no cream, but the ivy would help the presentation of the food by serving as a centerpiece, a word which here means "a decoration placed in the middle of a table, often used to distract people from the food." Of course, orange granita and iced coffee are not often served at *al fresco* breakfasts on cold mountain peaks, and bread with jam is more traditionally prepared as toast, but without a source of heat or any other cooking equipment, Sunny had done the best she could, and she hoped that Olaf and his troupe might appreciate her efforts.

"Caffefredde, sorbet, toast tartar," she announced.

"What is this?" Count Olaf said suspiciously, peering into his coffee cup. "It looks like coffee, but it's freezing cold!"

"And what is this orange stuff?" Esmé asked suspiciously. "I want fashionable, in food, not a handful of ice!"

Colette picked up a piece of the bread and stared at it suspiciously. "This toast feels raw," she said. "Is it safe to eat raw toast?"

“Of course not,” Hugo said. “I bet that baby is trying to poison us.”

“Actually, the coffee isn’t bad,” one of the white-faced women said, “even if it is a little bitter. Could someone pass the sugar, please?”

“*Sugar?”* shrieked Count Olaf, erupting in anger. He stood up, grabbed one end of the blanket, and pulled as hard as he could, scattering all of Sunny’s hard work. Food, beverages, and dishes fell everywhere, and Sunny had to duck to avoid getting hit on the head with a flying fork. “All the sugar in the world couldn’t save this terrible breakfast!” he roared, and then leaned down so that his shiny, shiny eyes stared right into Sunny’s. “I told you to make a nice, hot breakfast, and you gave me cold, disgusting nonsense!” he said, his smelly breath making a cloud in the chilly air. “Don’t you see how high up we are, you sabertoothed papoose? If I threw you off Mount Fraught, you’d never survive!”

“Olaf!” Esmé said. “I’m surprised at you! Surely you remember that we’ll never get the Baudelaire fortune if we toss Sunny off the mountain. We have to keep Sunny alive for the greater good.”

“Yes, yes,” Count Olaf said. “I remember. I’m not going to throw the orphan off the mountain. I just wanted to terrify her.” He gave Sunny a cruel smirk, and then turned to the hook-handed man. “Walk over to that frozen waterfall,” he said, “and crack a hole in the ice with your hook. The stream is full of Stricken Salmon. Catch enough for all of us, and we’ll have the baby prepare us a proper meal.”

“Good idea, Olaf,” the hook-handed man said, standing up and walking toward the icy slope. “You’re as smart as you are intelligent.”

“Sakesushi,” Sunny said quietly, which meant “I don’t think you’ll enjoy salmon if it’s not cooked.”

“Stop your baby talk and wash these dishes,” Olaf ordered. “They’re covered in lousy food.”

“You know, Olaf,” said the white-faced woman who had asked for sugar, “it’s none of my business, but we might put someone else in charge of cooking. It was probably difficult for a baby to prepare a hot breakfast without a fire."

"But there is a fire," said a deep, low voice, and everyone turned around to see who had arrived.

Having an aura of menace is like having a pet weasel, because you rarely meet someone who has one, and when you do it makes you want to hide under the coffee table. An aura of menace is simply a distinct feeling of evil that accompanies the arrival of certain people, and very few individuals are evil enough to produce an aura of menace that is very strong. Count Olaf, for example, had an aura of menace that the three Baudelaires had felt the moment they met him, but a number of other people never seemed to sense that a villain was in their midst, even when Olaf was standing right next to them with an evil gleam in his eye. But when two visitors arrived at the highest peak of the Mortmain Mountains, their aura of menace was unmistakable. Sunny gasped when she saw them. Esmé Squalor shuddered in her snowsuit. The members of Olaf's troupe—all except the hook-handed man, who was busy fishing for salmon and so was lucky enough to miss the visitors' arrival—gazed down at the snowy ground rather than take a further look at them. Count Olaf himself looked a bit nervous as the man, the woman, and their aura of menace drew closer and closer. And even I, after all this time, can feel their aura of menace so strongly, just by writing about these two people, that I dare not say their names, and will instead refer to them the way everyone who dares refer to them refers to them, as "the man with a beard, but no hair" and "the woman with hair, but no beard."

"It's good to see you, Olaf," continued the deep voice, and Sunny realized that the voice belonged to the sinister-looking woman. She was dressed in a suit made of a strange blue fabric that was very shiny, decorated with two large pads, one on each shoulder. She was dragging a wooden toboggan—a word which here means "a sled big enough to hold several people," which made an eerie scraping sound against the cold ground. "I was worried that the authorities might have captured you."

"You look well," said the man with a beard but no hair. He was dressed identically to the woman with hair but no beard, but his voice was very hoarse, as if he had been screaming for hours and could hardly talk. “It’s been a long time since we’ve laid eyes on one another.” The man gave Olaf a grin that made it seem even colder on the mountain peak, and then stopped and helped the woman lean the toboggan against the rock where Sunny had served breakfast. The youngest Baudelaire saw that the toboggan was painted with the familiar eye insignia, and had a few long leather straps, presumably used for steering.

Count Olaf coughed lightly into his hand, which is something people often do when they cannot think of what to say. “Hello,” he said, a bit nervously. “Did I hear you say something about a fire?”

The man with a beard but no hair and the woman with hair but no beard looked at one another and shared a laugh that made Sunny cover her ears with her hands. “Haven’t you noticed,” the woman said, “that there are no snow gnats around?”

“We had noticed that,” Esmé said. “I thought maybe snow gnats were no longer in.”

“Don’t be ridiculous, Esmé,” said the man with a beard but no hair. He reached out and kissed Esmé’s hand, which Sunny could see was trembling. “The gnats aren’t around because they can smell the smoke.”

“I don’t smell anything,” said Hugo.

“Well, if you were a tiny insect, you’d smell something,” replied the woman with hair but no beard. “If you were a snow gnat, you’d smell the smoke from the V.F.D. headquarters.”

“We did you a favor, Olaf,” the man said. “We burned the entire place down.”

“No!” Sunny cried, before she could stop herself. By “No!” she meant “I certainly hope that isn’t true, because my siblings and I hoped to reach V.F.D. headquarters, solve the mysteries that surround us, and perhaps find one of our parents,” but she had not planned to say it out loud. The two visitors looked down at the youngest Baudelaire, casting their aura of menace in her direction.

“What is that?” asked the man with a beard but no hair.

“That’s the youngest Baudelaire,” replied Esmé. “We’ve eliminated the other two, but we’re keeping this one around to do our bidding until we can finally steal the fortune.”

The woman with hair but no beard nodded. “Infant servants are so troublesome,” she said. “I had an infant servant once—a long time ago, before the schism.”

“Before the schism?” Olaf said, and Sunny wished Klaus were with her, because the baby did not know what the word “schism” meant. “That *is* a long time ago. That infant must be all grown up by now.”

“Not necessarily,” the woman said, and laughed again, while her companion leaned down to gaze at Sunny. Sunny could not bear to look into the eyes of the man with a beard but no hair, and instead looked down at his shiny shoes.

“So this is Sunny Baudelaire,” he said in his strange, hoarse voice. “Well, well, well. I’ve heard so much about this little orphan. She’s caused almost as many problems as her parents did.” He stood up again and looked around at Olaf and his troupe. “But we know how to solve problems, don’t we? Fire can solve any problem in the world.”

He began to laugh, and the woman with hair but no beard laughed along with him. Nervously, Count Olaf began to laugh, too, and then glared at his troupe until they laughed along with him, and Sunny found herself surrounded by tall, laughing villains. “Oh, it was wonderful,” said the woman with hair but no beard. “First we burned down the kitchen. Then we burned down the dining room. Then we burned down the parlor, and then the disguise center, the movie room, and the stables. Then we moved on to the gymnasium and the training center, and the garage and all six of the laboratories. We burned down the dormitories and schoolrooms, the lounge, the theater, and the music room, as well as the museum and the ice cream shop. Then we burned down the rehearsal studios and the testing centers and the swimming pool, which was very hard to burn down. Then we burned down all the bathrooms, and then finally, we burned down the V.F.D. library last night. That was my favorite part—books and books and books, all turned to ashes so no one could read them. You should have been there, Olaf! Every morning we lit fires and every evening we celebrated with a bottle of wine and some finger puppets. We've been wearing these fireproof suits for almost a month. It's been a marvelous time."

"Why did you burn it down gradually?" Count Olaf asked. "Whenever I burn something down, I do it all at once."

"We couldn't have burned down the entire headquarters at once," said the man with a beard but no hair. "Someone would have spotted us. Remember, where there's smoke there's fire."

"But if you burned the headquarters down room by room," Esmé said, "didn't all of the volunteers escape?"

"They were gone already," said the man, and scratched his head where his hair might have been. "The entire headquarters were deserted. It was as if they knew we were coming. Oh well, you can't win them all."

"Maybe we'll find some of them when we burn down the carnival," said the woman, in her deep, deep voice.

"Carnival?" Olaf asked nervously.

"Yes," the woman said, and scratched the place where her beard would have been, if she had one. "There's an important piece of evidence that V.F.D. has hidden in a figurine sold at Caligari Carnival, so we need to go burn it down."

"I burned it down already," Count Olaf said.

"The whole place?" the woman said in surprise.

"The whole place," Olaf said, giving her a nervous smile.

“Congratulations,” she said, in a deep purr. “You’re better than I thought, Olaf.”

Count Olaf looked relieved, as if he had not been sure whether the woman was going to compliment him or kick him. “Well, it’s all for the greater good,” he said.

“As a reward,” the woman said, “I have a gift for you, Olaf.” Sunny watched as the woman reached into the pocket of her shiny suit and drew out a stack of paper, tied together with thick rope. The paper looked very old and worn, as if it had been passed around to a variety of different people, hidden in a number of secret compartments, and perhaps even divided into different piles, driven around a city in horse-drawn carriages, and then put back together at midnight in the back room of a bookstore disguised as a café disguised as a sporting goods store. Count Olaf’s eyes grew very wide and very shiny, and he reached his filthy hands toward it as if it were the Baudelaire fortune itself.

“The Snicket file!” he said, in a hushed whisper.

“It’s all here,” the woman said. “Every chart, every map and every photograph from the only file that could put us all in jail.”

“It’s complete except for page thirteen, of course,” the man said. “We understand that the Baudelaires managed to steal that page from Heimlich Hospital.”

The two visitors glared down at Sunny Baudelaire, who couldn’t help whimpering in fear. “Surchmi,” she said. She meant something along the lines of, “I don’t have it—my siblings do,” but she did not need a translator.

“The older orphans have it,” Olaf said, “but I’m fairly certain they’re dead.”

“Then all of our problems have gone up in smoke,” said the woman with hair but no beard.

Count Olaf grabbed the file and held it to his chest as if it were a newborn baby, although he was not the sort of person to treat a newborn baby very kindly. “This is the most wonderful gift in the world,” he said. “I’m going to go read it right now.”

“We’ll all read it together,” said the woman with hair but no beard. “It contains secrets we all ought to know.”

“But first,” said the man with a beard but no hair, “I have a gift for your girlfriend, Olaf.”

“For me?” Esmé asked.

“I found these in one of the rooms of headquarters,” the man said. “I’ve never seen one before, but it has been quite some time since I was a volunteer.” With a sly smile, he reached into his pocket and took out a small green tube.

“What’s that?” Esmé asked.

“I think it’s a cigarette,” the man said.

“A cigarette!” Esmé said, with a smile as big as Olaf’s. “How in!”

“I thought you’d enjoy them,” the man said. “Here, try it. I happen to have quite a few matches right here.”

The man with a beard but no hair struck a match, lit the end of the green tube, and offered it to the wicked girlfriend, who grabbed it and held it to her mouth. A bitter smell, like that of burning vegetables, filled the air, and Esmé Squalor began to cough.

“What’s the matter?” asked the woman in her deep voice. “I thought you liked things that are in.”

“I do,” Esmé said, and then coughed quite a bit more. Sunny was reminded of Mr. Poe, who was always coughing into a handkerchief, as Esmé coughed and coughed and finally dropped the green tube to the ground where it spewed out a dark green smoke. “I love cigarettes,” she explained to the man with a beard but no hair, “but I prefer to smoke them with a long holder because I don’t like the smell or taste and because they’re very bad for you.”

“Never mind that now,” Count Olaf said impatiently. “Let’s go into my tent and read the file.” He started to walk toward the tent but stopped and glared at his comrades, who were beginning to follow him. “The rest of you stay out here,” he said. “There are secrets in this file that I do not want you to know.”

The two sinister visitors began to laugh, and followed Count Olaf and Esmé into the tent, closing the flap behind them. Sunny stood with Hugo, Colette, Kevin, and the two white-faced women and stared after them in silence, waiting for the aura of menace to disappear.

“Who were those people?” asked the hook-handed man, and everyone turned to see that he had returned from his fishing expedition. Four salmon hung from each of his hooks, dripping with the waters of the Stricken Stream.

“I don’t know,” said one of the white-faced women, “but they made me very nervous.”

“If they’re friends of Count Olaf’s,” Kevin said, “how bad could they be?”

The members of the troupe looked at one another, but no one answered the ambidextrous person’s question. “What did that man mean when he said ‘Where there’s smoke there’s fire’?” Hugo asked.

“I don’t know,” Colette said. A chilly wind blew, and Sunny watched her contort her body in the breeze until it looked almost as curvy as the smoke from the green tube Esmé had dropped.

“Forget those questions,” the hook-handed man said. “My question is, how are you going to prepare this salmon, orphan?”

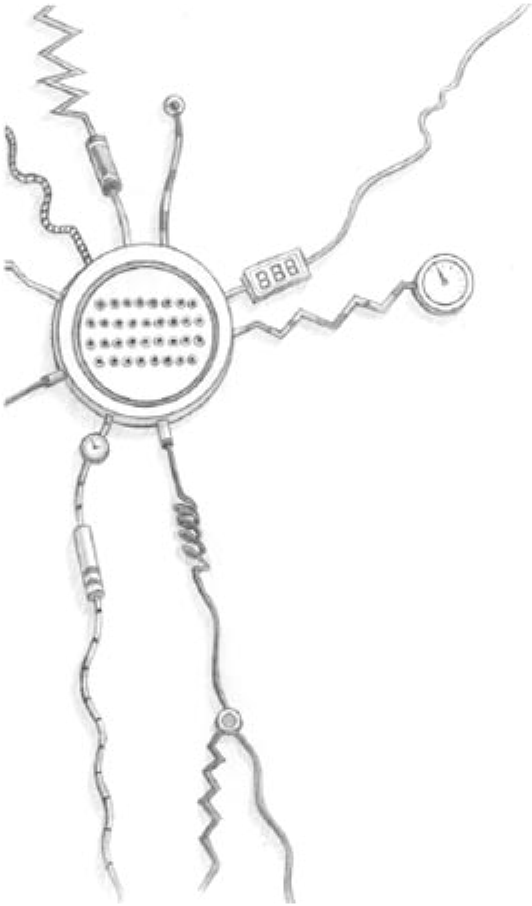
Olaf’s henchman was looking down at Sunny, but the youngest Baudelaire did not answer for a moment. Sunny was thinking, and her siblings would have been proud of her for the way she was thinking. Klaus would have been proud, because she was thinking about the phrase “Where there’s smoke there’s fire,” and what it might mean. And Violet would have been proud, because she was thinking about the salmon that the hook-handed man was holding, and what she might invent that would help her. Sunny stared at the hook-handed man and thought as hard as she could, and she felt almost as if both siblings were with her, Klaus helping her think about a phrase and Violet helping her think about an invention.

“Answer me, baby,” the hook-handed man growled. “What are you going to make for us out of this salmon?”

“Lox!” Sunny said, but it was as if all three of the Baudelaires had answered the question.

CHAPTER
Seven

An associate of mine once wrote a novel called *Corridors of Power*, which told the story of various people discussing how the world has become a corrupt and dangerous place and whether or not there are enough people with the integrity and decency necessary to keep the entire planet from descending into despair. I have not read this novel in several years, because I participate in enough discussions on how the world has become a corrupt and dangerous place and whether or not there are enough people with the integrity and decency necessary to keep the entire planet from descending into despair without reading about it in my leisure time, but nevertheless the phrase “corridors of power” has come to mean the hushed and often secret places where important matters are discussed. Whether or not they are actual corridors, the corridors of power tend to feel quiet and mysterious. If you have ever walked inside an important building, such as the main branch of a library or the office of a dentist who has agreed to disguise your teeth, then you may have experienced this feeling that accompanies the corridors of power, and Violet and Klaus Baudelaire experienced it as they reached the end of the Vertical Flame Diversion, and followed the mysterious sweatered scout as he climbed out of the secret passageway. Even through their masks, the two siblings could sense that they were in an important place, even though it was nothing more than a dim, curved hallway with a small grate on the ceiling where the morning light was shining through.



“That’s where the smoke escapes from the Snow Scouts’ fire,” whispered the mysterious scout, pointing up at the ceiling. “That leads to the very center of the Valley of Four Drafts, so the smoke is scattered to the four winds. V.F.D. doesn’t want anyone to see the smoke.”

“Where there’s smoke,” Violet said, “there’s fire.”

“Exactly,” the scout said. “Anyone who saw smoke coming from this high up in the mountains might become suspicious and investigate. In fact, I found a device that works exactly according to this principle.” He reached into his backpack and drew out a small rectangular box filled with small green tubes, exactly like the one that Sunny had seen the man with a beard but no hair give to Esmé Squalor.

“No thank you,” Violet said. “I don’t smoke.”

“I don’t, either,” the scout said, “but these aren’t cigarettes. These are Verdant Flammable Devices. Verdant means ‘green,’ so when you light one, it gives out a dark green smoke, so another volunteer will know where you are.”

Klaus took the box from the scout and squinted at it in the dim light. “I’ve seen a box like this before,” he said, “in my father’s desk, when I was looking for a letter opener. I remember thinking it was strange to find them, because he didn’t smoke.”

“He must have been hiding them,” Violet said. “Why was he keeping them a secret?”

“The entire organization is a secret,” the scout said. “It was very difficult for me to learn the secret location of the headquarters.”

“It was difficult for us, too,” Klaus said. “We found it in a coded map.”

“I had to draw my own map,” the scout said, and reached into a pocket in his sweater. He turned on the flashlight, and the two Baudelaires could see he was holding a notebook with a dark purple cover.

“What’s that?” Violet asked.

“It’s a commonplace book,” the scout said. “Whenever I find something that seems important or interesting, I write it down. That way, all my important information is in one place.”

“I should start one,” Klaus said. “My pockets are bulging with scraps of paper.”

“From information I read in Dr. Montgomery’s book, and a few others,” the scout said, “I managed to draw a map of where to go from here.” He opened the purple notebook and flipped a few pages until he reached a small but elegant rendering of the cave, the Vertical Flame Diversion, and the hallway in which they were standing now. “As you can see,” he said, running his finger along the hallway, “the passageway branches off in two directions.”

“This is a very well-drawn map,” Violet said.

“Thank you,” the scout replied. “I’ve been interested in cartography for quite some time. See, if we go to the left, there’s a small area used for sled and snowsuit storage, at least according to a newspaper article I found. But if we go right, we’ll arrive at the Vernacularly Fastened Door, which should open onto the headquarters’ kitchen. We might walk in on the entire organization having breakfast.”

The two Baudelaires looked at one another through their masks, and Violet put a hand on her brother’s shoulder. They did not dare to say out loud their hope that one of their parents might be just around the corner. “Let’s go,” Violet whispered.

The scout nodded silently in agreement, and led the Baudelaires down the hallway, which seemed to get colder and colder with every step. By now they were so far from Bruce and the Snow Scouts that there was no need to whisper, but all three children kept quiet as they walked down the dim, curved hallway, hushed by the feeling of the corridors of power. At last they reached a large metal door with a strange device where the doorknob should have been. The device looked a bit like a spider, with curly wires spreading out in all directions, but where the head of the spider might have been was the keyboard of a typewriter. Even in her excitement to see the headquarters, Violet’s inventing mind was interested in such a device, and she leaned closer to see what it was.

“Wait,” the sweatered scout said, reaching his arm out to stop her. “This is a coded lock. If we don’t operate it properly, we won’t be able to get into the headquarters.”

“How does it work?” Violet said, shivering slightly in the cold.

“I’m not sure,” the scout admitted, and took out his commonplace book again. “It’s called the Vernacularly Fastened Door, so—”

“So it operates on language,” Klaus finished. “Vernacular is a word for ‘a local language or dialect.’”

“Of course,” Violet said. “See how the wires are curled around the hinges of the door? They’re locked in place, unless you type in the right sequence of letters on that keyboard. There are more letters than numbers, so it would be more difficult for someone to guess the combination of the lock.”

“That’s what I read,” the scout confirmed, looking at a page in his notebook. “You’re supposed to type in three specific phrases in a row. The phrases change every season, so volunteers need to have a lot of information at their fingertips to use this door. The first is the name of the scientist most widely credited with the discovery of gravity.”

“That’s easy,” Violet said, and typed in S-IR-I-S-A-A-C-N-E-W-T-O-N, the name of a physicist she had always admired. When she was finished, there was a muted clicking sound from the typewriter keyboard, as if the device was warming up.

“The second is the Latin name for the Volunteer Feline Detectives,” the scout said. “I found the answer in *Remarkable Phenomena of the Mortmain Mountains*. It’s *Panthera leo*.” He leaned forward and typed in P-A-N-T-H-E-RA-L-E-O. There was a very quiet buzzing sound, and the children saw that the wires near the hinges were shaking very slightly.

“It’s beginning to unlock,” Violet said. “I hope I get a chance to study this invention.”

“Let’s get to the headquarters first,” Klaus said. “What’s the third phrase?”

The scout sighed, and turned a page in the commonplace book. “I’m not sure,” he admitted. “Another volunteer told me that it’s the central theme of Leo Tolstoy’s novel *Anna Karenina,* but I haven’t had a chance to read it yet.”

Violet knew that her brother was smiling, even though she could not see his face through the mask. She was remembering one summer, very long ago, when Klaus was very young and Sunny was not even conceived. Every summer, the Baudelaires’ mother would read a very long book, joking that lifting a large novel was the only exercise she liked to get during the hot months. During the time Violet was thinking of, Mrs. Baudelaire chose *Anna Karenina* for her summer reading, and Klaus would sit on his mother's lap for hours at a time while she read. The middle Baudelaire had not been reading very long, but their mother helped him with the big words and would occasionally stop reading to explain what had happened in the story, and in this way Klaus and his mother read the story of Ms. Karenina, whose boyfriend treats her so poorly that she throws herself under a train. Violet had spent most of that summer studying the laws of thermodynamics and building a miniature helicopter out of an eggbeater and some old copper wiring, but she knew that Klaus must remember the central theme of the book he read on his mother's lap.

"The central theme of *Anna Karenina*," he said, "is that a rural life of moral simplicity, despite its monotony, is the preferable personal narrative to a daring life of impulsive passion, which only leads to tragedy."

"That's a very long theme," the scout said.

"It's a very long book," Klaus replied. "But I can work quickly. My sisters and I once tapped out a long telegram in no time at all."

"Too bad that telegram never arrived," the scout said quietly, but the middle Baudelaire was already pressing the keys on the Vernacularly Fastened Door. As Klaus typed the words "a rural life," a phrase which here means "living in the country," the wires began to curl and uncurl very quickly, like worms on a sidewalk after it has rained, and by the time Klaus was typing "the preferable personal narrative," a phrase which here means "the way to live your life," the entire door was quivering as if it were as nervous as the Baudelaires. Finally, Klaus typed "T-R-A-G-E-D-Y," and the three children stepped back, but instead of opening, the door stopped shaking and the wires stopped moving, and the passageway was dead quiet.

"It's not opening," Violet said. "Maybe that isn't the central theme of Leo Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*."

"It seemed like it was working until the last word," the scout said.

“Maybe the mechanism is a little stuck,” Violet said.

“Or maybe a daring life of impulsive passion only leads to something else,” the scout said, and in some cases this mysterious person was right. A daring life of impulsive passion is an expression which refers to people who follow what is in their hearts, and like people who prefer to follow their head, or follow the advice of other people, or follow a mysterious man in a dark blue raincoat, people who lead a daring life of impulsive passion end up doing all sorts of things. For instance, if you ever find yourself reading a book entitled The Bible, you would find the story of Adam and Eve, whose daring life of impulsive passion led to them putting on clothing for the first time in their lives, in order to leave the snake-infested garden where they had been living. Bonnie and Clyde, another famous couple who lived a daring life of impulsive passion, found that it led them to a successful if short career in bank robbery. And in my own case, in the few moments where I have led a daring life of impulsive passion, it has led to all sorts of trouble, from false accusations of arson to a broken cuff link I can never have repaired. But in this case, as the Baudelaires stood at the Vernacularly Fastened Door, hoping to reach the V.F.D. headquarters, rescue their sister, and see if one of their parents was indeed alive, it was not the sweatered scout but the two Baudelaires who were right, because in Leo Tolstoy’s *Anna Karenina*, a daring life of impulsive passion leads only to tragedy, as Klaus said, and as Violet said, the mechanism was a little stuck, and after a few seconds, the door swung open with a slow and eerie creak. The children stepped through the door, blinking in the sudden light, and stood frozen in their steps. If you have read this far in the Baudelaires’ woeful story, then you will not be surprised to learn that the V.F.D. headquarters in the Valley of Four Drafts in the Mortmain Mountains was no more, but Violet and Klaus, of course, were not reading their own story. They were in their own story, and this was the part of their story where they were sick with shock at what they saw.

The Vernacularly Fastened Door did not open onto a kitchen, not anymore. When the Baudelaires followed the mysterious scout through the doorway, they found themselves standing in what at first seemed to be a large field, growing a black and ruined harvest in a valley as cold and drafty as its name. But slowly, they saw the charred remains of the grand and impressive building that had stood where the three children were standing. Nearby was a handful of silverware that had survived the blaze, scattered in front of the remnants of a stove, and a refrigerator stood to one side, as if it were guarding the ashen remains of the rest of the kitchen. To one side was a pile of burnt wood that had probably once been a large dining table, with a half-melted candelabra sticking out of the top like a baby tree. Farther away, they could see the mysterious shapes of other objects that had survived the fire—a trombone, the pendulum of a grandfather clock, what looked like a periscope, or perhaps a spyglass, an ice cream scoop, lying forlornly in a pile of ashes encrusted with burnt sugar, and an iron archway emblazoned with the words "V.F.D. Library," but there was nothing beyond the archway but piles and piles of blackened remains. It was a devastating sight, and it made Violet and Klaus feel as if they were all alone in a world that had been completely ruined. The only thing they could see that seemed untouched by the fire was a sheer, white wall, beyond the refrigerator, that rose up as far as two siblings could see. It took the Baudelaires a few moments to realize that it was a frozen waterfall, rising up in a slippery slope toward the source of the Stricken Stream on Mount Fraught, so shiny and white that it made the ruined headquarters look even darker.

"It must have been beautiful," the sweatered scout said, in a quivering voice. He walked toward the waterfall, his feet churning up black dust with every step. "I read that there was a large window," he said, moving his gloved hand in the air as if it were still there. "When it was your turn to cook, you could look out at the waterfall while you were chopping vegetables or simmering a sauce. It was supposed to be very peaceful. And there was a mechanism just outside the window that turned some of the water from the pool into steam. The steam rose up and covered the headquarters, so it couldn't be seen through the blanket of mist."

The Baudelaires walked to where the scout was standing, and looked into the frozen pool at the bottom of the waterfall. The pool branched off into two tributaries, a word which here means "divisions of a river or stream, each twisting off in a different direction past the ruins of the headquarters, and curving around the Mortmain Mountains until they disappeared from view." Violet and Klaus gazed sadly at the icy swirls of black and gray they had noticed when they were walking alongside the

Stricken Stream. “It was ashes,” Klaus said quietly. “Ashes from the fire fell into the pool at the bottom of the waterfall, and the stream carried them down the river.”

Violet found that it was easier to discuss a small, specific matter than think about her immense disappointment. “But the pool is frozen solid,” she said. “The stream couldn’t have carried the ashes anywhere.”

“It wouldn’t have been frozen when it happened,” Klaus replied. “The heat from the fire would have thawed the pool.”

“It must have been awful to see,” the sweatered scout said. Violet and Klaus stood with him, imagining the inferno, a word which here means “enormous fire that destroyed a secret headquarters high in the mountains.” They could almost hear the shattering of glass as the windows fell away, and the crackle of the fire as it consumed everything it could. They could almost smell the thick smoke as it floated upward and blackened the sky, and they could almost see the books in the library, falling from the burning shelves and tumbling into ashes. The only thing they could not picture was who might have been at the headquarters when the fire began, running out into the freezing cold to avoid the flames.

“Do you think,” Violet said, “any of the volunteers…”

“There’s no sign that anyone was here,” the scout said quickly.

“But how can we know for sure?” Klaus asked. “There could be a survivor someplace right now.”

“Hello?” Violet called, looking around her at the rubble. *“Hello?”* She found that her eyes were filling with tears, as she called out for the people she knew in her heart were nowhere nearby. The eldest Baudelaire felt as if she had been calling for these people since that terrible day on the beach, and that if she called them enough they might appear before her. She thought of all the times she had called them, back when she lived with her siblings in the Baudelaire mansion. Sometimes she called them when she wanted them to see something she had invented. Sometimes she called them when she wanted them to know she had arrived home. And sometimes she

called them just because she wanted to know where they were. Sometimes Violet just wanted to see them, and feel that she was safe as long as they were around. *"Mother!"* Violet Baudelaire called. *"Father!"*

There was no answer.

"Mom!" Klaus called. *"Dad!"*

The Baudelaires heard nothing but the rush of all four of the valley's drafts, and a long creak as the Vernacularly Fastened Door blew shut. They saw that the door had been made to look just like the side of the mountain, so that they could scarcely see where they had come from, or the way to get back. Now they were truly alone.

"I know we were all hoping to find people at the headquarters," the sweatered scout said gently, "but I don't think anyone is here. I think we're all by ourselves."

"That's *impossible*!" Klaus cried, and Violet could hear that he was crying. He reached through his layers of clothing until he found his pocket, and pulled out page thirteen from the Snicket file, which he had been carrying with him since the Baudelaires had found it at Heimlich Hospital. The page had a photograph of their parents, standing with Jacques Snicket and another man the Baudelaires had been unable to identify, and above the photograph was a sentence Klaus had memorized from reading it so many times. "'Because of the evidence discussed on page nine,'" he recited tearfully, "'experts now suspect that there may in fact be one survivor of the fire, but the survivor's whereabouts are unknown.'" He walked up to the scout and shook the page in his face. "We thought the survivor would be here," he said.

"I think the survivor *is* here," the scout said quietly, and removed his mask to reveal his face at last. "I'm Quigley Quagmire," he said, "I survived the fire that destroyed my home, and I was hoping to find my brother and sister."

CHAPTER
Eight

It is one of the peculiar truths of life that people often say things that they know full well are ridiculous. If someone asks you how you are, for example, you might automatically say “Fine, thank you,” when in fact you have just failed an examination or been trampled by an ox. A friend might tell you, “I’ve looked everywhere in the world for my keys,” when you know that they have actually only looked in a few places in the immediate area. Once I said to a woman I loved very much, “I’m sure that this trouble will end soon, and you and I will spend the rest of our lives together in happiness and bliss,” when I actually suspected that things were about to get much worse. And so it was with the two elder Baudelaires, when they stood face-to-face with Quigley Quagmire and found themselves to be saying things they knew were absurd.

“You’re dead,” Violet said, and took off her mask to make sure she was seeing things clearly. But there was no mistaking Quigley, even though the Baudelaires had never seen him before. He looked so much like Duncan and Isadora that he could only be the third Quagmire triplet.

“You perished in a fire along with your parents,” Klaus said, but as he took off his mask he knew this wasn’t so. Quigley was even giving the two Baudelaires a small smile that looked exactly like his siblings’.

“No,” Quigley said. “I survived, and I’ve been looking for my siblings ever since.”

“But how did you survive?” Violet asked. “Duncan and Isadora said that the house burned to the ground.”

“It did,” Quigley said sadly. He looked out at the frozen waterfall and sighed deeply. “I suppose I should start at the beginning. I was in my family’s library, studying a map of the Finite Forest, when I heard a shattering of glass, and people shouting. My mother ran into the room and said there was a fire. We tried to go out the front door but the main hall was filled with smoke, so she took me back into the library and lifted a corner of the rug. There was a secret door underneath. She told me to wait down below while she fetched my siblings, and she left me there in the dark. I remember hearing the house falling to pieces above me, and the sound of frantic footsteps, and my siblings screaming.” Quigley put his mask down on the ground and looked at the two Baudelaires. “But she never came back,” he said. “Nobody came back, and when I tried to open the door, something had fallen on top of it and it wouldn’t budge.”

“How did you get out?” Klaus asked.

“I walked,” Quigley said. “When it became clear that no one was going to rescue me, I felt around in the dark and realized I was in a sort of passageway. There was nowhere else to go, so I started walking. I’ve never been so frightened in my life, walking alone in some dark passageway my parents had kept secret. I couldn’t imagine where it would lead.”

The two Baudelaires looked at one another. They were thinking about the secret passageway they had discovered underneath their home, which they had discovered when they were under the care of Esmé Squalor and her husband. “And where did it lead?” Violet said.

“To the house of a herpetologist,” Quigley said. “At the end of the passageway was a secret door that opened into an enormous room, made entirely of glass. The room was filled with empty cages, but it was clear that the room had once housed an enormous collection of reptiles.”

“We’ve been there!” Klaus cried in amazement. “That’s Uncle Monty’s house! He was our guardian until Count Olaf arrived, disguised as—”

“As a lab assistant,” Quigley finished. “I know. His suitcase was still there.”

“There was a secret passageway under our house, too,” Violet said, “but we didn’t discover it until we lived with Esmé Squalor.”

“There are secrets everywhere,” Quigley said. “I think everyone’s parents have secrets. You just have to know where to look for them.”

“But why would our parents, and yours, have tunnels underneath their homes leading to a fancy apartment building and a herpetologist’s home?” Klaus said. “It doesn’t make any sense.”

Quigley sighed, and put his backpack on the ashen ground, next to his mask. “There’s a lot that doesn’t make sense,” he said. “I was hoping to find the answers here, but now I don’t know if I’ll ever find them.” He took out his purple notebook and opened it to the first page. “All I can tell you is what I have here in this commonplace book.”

Klaus gave Quigley a small smile, and reached into his pockets to retrieve all of the papers he had stored there. “You tell us what you know,” he said, “and we’ll tell you what we know. Perhaps together we can answer our own questions.”

Quigley nodded in agreement, and the three children sat in a circle on what was once the kitchen floor. Quigley opened his backpack and took out a bag of salted almonds, which he passed around. “You must be hungry from the climb up the Vertical Flame Diversion,” he said. “I know I am. Let’s see, where was I?”

“In the Reptile Room,” Violet said, “at the end of the passageway.”

“Well, nothing happened for a while,” Quigley said. “On the doorstep of the house was a copy of *The Daily Punctilio*, which had an article about the fire. That’s how I learned that my parents were dead. I spent days and days there, all by myself. I was so sad, and so scared, and I didn’t know what else to do. I suppose I was waiting for the herpetologist to show up for work, and see if he was a friend of my parents and might be of some assistance. The kitchen was filled with food, so I had enough to eat, and every night I slept at the bottom of the stairs, so I could hear if anyone came in.”

The Baudelaires nodded sympathetically, and Violet put a comforting hand on Quigley’s shoulder. “We were the same way,” Violet said, “right when we heard the news about our parents. I scarcely remember what we did and what we said.”

“But didn’t anyone come looking for you?” Klaus asked.

“*The Daily Punctilio* said that I died in the fire, too,” Quigley said. “The article said that my sister and brother were sent off to Prufrock Preparatory

School, and that my parents' estate was under the care of the city's sixth most important financial advisor."

"*Esmé Squalor*," Violet and Klaus said simultaneously, a word which here means "in a disgusted voice, and at the exact same time."

"Right," Quigley said, "but I wasn't interested in that part of the story. I was determined to go to the school and find my siblings again. I found an atlas in Dr. Montgomery's library, and studied it until I found Prufrock Preparatory School. It wasn't too far, so I started to gather whatever supplies I could find around his house."

"Didn't you think of calling the authorities?" Klaus asked.

"I guess I wasn't thinking very clearly," Quigley admitted. "All I could think of was finding my siblings."

"Of course," Violet said. "So what happened then?"

"I was interrupted," Quigley said. "Someone walked in just as I was putting the atlas in a totebag I found. It was Jacques Snicket, although I didn't know who he was, of course. But he knew who I was, and was overjoyed that I was alive after all."

"How did you know you could trust him?" Klaus asked.

"Well, he knew about the secret passageway," Quigley said. "In fact, he knew quite a bit about my family, even though he hadn't seen my parents in years. And…"

"And?" Violet said.

Quigley gave her a small smile. "And he was very well-read," he said. "In fact, he was at Dr. Montgomery's house to do a bit more reading. He said there was an important file that was hidden someplace on the premises, and he had to stay for a few days to try and complete his investigation."

"So he didn't take you to the school?" Violet asked.

“He said it wasn’t safe for me to be seen,” Quigley said. “He explained that he was part of a secret organization, and that my parents had been a part of it, too.”

“V.F.D.,” Klaus said, and Quigley nodded in agreement.

“Duncan and Isadora tried to tell us about V.F.D.,” Violet said, “but they never got the chance. We don’t even know what it stands for.”

“It seems to stand for many things,” Quigley said, flipping pages in his notebook. “Nearly everything the organization uses, from the Volunteer Feline Detectives to the Vernacularly Fastened Door, has the same initials.”

“But what is the organization?” Violet asked. “What is V.F.D.?”

“Jacques wouldn’t tell me,” Quigley said, “but I think the letters stand for Volunteer Fire Department.”

“Volunteer Fire Department,” Violet repeated, and looked at her brother. “What does that mean?”

“In some communities,” Klaus said, “there’s no official fire department, and so they rely on volunteers to extinguish fires.”

“I know that,” Violet said, “but what does that have to do with our parents, or Count Olaf, or anything that has happened to us? I always thought that knowing what the letters stood for would solve the mystery, but I’m as mystified as I ever was.”

“Do you think our parents were secretly fighting fires?” Klaus asked.

“But why would they keep it a secret?” Violet asked. “And why would they have a secret passageway underneath the house?”

“Jacques said that the passageways were built by members of the organization,” Quigley said. “In the case of an emergency, they could escape to a safe place.”

“But the tunnel we found connects our house to the home of Esmé Squalor,” Klaus said. “That’s not a safe place.”

“Something happened,” Quigley said. “Something that changed everything.” He flipped through a few pages of his commonplace book until he found what he was looking for. “Jacques Snicket called it a ‘schism,’” he said, “but I don’t know what that word means.”

“A schism,” Klaus said, “is a division of a previously united group of people into two or more oppositional parties. It’s like a big argument, with everybody choosing sides.”

“That makes sense,” Quigley said. “The way Jacques talked, it sounded like the entire organization was in chaos. Volunteers who were once working together are now enemies. Places that were once safe are now dangerous. Both sides are using the same codes, and the same disguises. Even the V.F.D. insignia used to represent the noble ideals everyone shared, but now it’s all gone up in smoke.”

“But how did the schism start?” Violet asked. “What was everyone fighting over?”

“I don’t know,” Quigley said. “Jacques didn’t have much time to explain things to me.”

“What was he doing?” Klaus asked.

“He was looking for you,” Quigley replied. “He showed me a picture of all three of you, waiting at the dock on some lake, and asked me if I’d seen you anywhere. He knew that you’d been placed in Count Olaf’s care, and all the terrible things that had happened there. He knew that you had gone to live with Dr. Montgomery. He even knew about some of the inventions you made, Violet, and the research you did, Klaus, and some of Sunny’s tooth-related exploits. He wanted to find you before it was too late.”

“Too late for what?” Violet said.

"I don't know," Quigley said with a sigh. "Jacques spent a long time at Dr. Montgomery's house, but he was too busy conducting his investigation to explain everything to me. He would stay up all night reading and copying information into his notebook, and then sleep all day, or disappear for hours at a time. And then one day, he said he had to go interview someone in the town of Paltryville, but he never came back. I waited weeks and weeks for him to return. I read books in Dr. Montgomery's library, and started a commonplace book of my own. At first it was difficult to find any information on V.F.D., but I took notes on anything I could find. I must have read hundreds of books, but Jacques never returned. Finally, one morning, two things happened that made me decide not to wait any longer. The first was an article in *The Daily Punctilio* saying that my siblings had been kidnapped from the school. I knew I had to do something. I couldn't wait for Jacques Snicket or for anyone else."

The Baudelaires nodded in solemn agreement. "What was the second thing?" Violet asked.

Quigley was silent for a moment, and he reached down to the ground and scooped up a handful of ashes, letting them fall from his gloved hands. "I smelled smoke," he said, "and when I opened the door of the Reptile Room, I saw that someone had thrown a torch through the glass of the ceiling, starting a fire in the library. Within minutes, the entire house was in flames."

"Oh," Violet said quietly. "Oh" is a word which usually means something along the lines of, "I heard you, and I'm not particularly interested," but in this case, of course, the eldest Baudelaire meant something entirely different, and it is something that is difficult to define. She meant "I am sad to hear that Uncle Monty's house burned down," but that is not all. By "Oh," Violet was also trying to describe her sadness about all of the fires that had brought Quigley and Klaus and herself here to the Mortmain Mountains, to huddle in a circle and try to solve the mystery that surrounded them. When Violet said "Oh," she was not only thinking of the fire in the Reptile Room, but the fires that had destroyed the Baudelaire home, and the Quagmire home, and Heimlich Hospital, and Caligari Carnival, and the V.F.D. headquarters, where the smell of smoke still lingered around where the children were sitting. Thinking of all those fires made Violet feel as if the entire world were going up in flames, and that she and her siblings and all the other decent people in the world might never find a place that was truly safe.

“Another fire,” Klaus murmured, and Violet knew he was thinking the same thing. “Where could you go, Quigley?”

“The only place I could think of was Paltryville,” Quigley said. “The last time I saw Jacques, he’d said he was going there. I thought if I went there I might find him again, and see if he could help me rescue Duncan and Isadora. Dr. Montgomery’s atlas showed me how to get there, but I had to go on foot, because I was afraid that anyone who might offer me a ride would be an enemy. It was a long time before I finally arrived, but as soon as I stepped into town I saw a large building that matched the tattoo on Jacques Snicket’s ankle. I thought it might be a safe place to go.”

“Dr. Orwell’s office!” Klaus cried. “That’s not a safe place to go!”

“Klaus was hypnotized there,” Violet explained, “and Count Olaf was disguised as—”

“As a receptionist,” Quigley finished. “I know. His fake nameplate was still on the desk. The office was deserted, but I could tell that Jacques had been there, because there were some notes in his handwriting that he’d left on the desk. With those notes, and the information I’d read in Dr. Montgomery’s library, I learned about the V.F.D. headquarters. So instead of waiting for Jacques again, I set out to find the organization. I thought they were my best hope of rescuing my siblings.”

“So you set off to the Mortmain Mountains by yourself?” Violet asked.

“Not quite by myself,” Quigley said. “I had this backpack that Jacques left behind, with the Verdant Flammable Devices and a few other items, and I had my commonplace book. And eventually, I ran into the Snow Scouts, and realized that hiding among them would be the quickest way to reach Mount Fraught.” He turned a page in his commonplace book and examined his notes. “*Remarkable Phenomena of the Mortmain Mountains*, which I read in Dr. Montgomery’s library, had a hidden chapter that told me all about the Vertical Flame Diversion and the Vernacularly Fastened Door.”

Klaus looked over Quigley’s shoulder to read his notes. “I should have read that book when I had the chance,” he said, shaking his head. “If we had known about V.F.D. when we were living with Uncle Monty, we might have avoided all the trouble that followed.”

“When we were living with Uncle Monty,” Violet reminded him, “we were too busy trying to escape Count Olaf’s clutches to do any additional research.”

“I’ve had plenty of time to do research,” Quigley said, “but I still haven’t found all the answers I’m looking for. I still haven’t found Duncan and Isadora, and I still don’t know where Jacques Snicket is.”

“He’s dead,” Klaus said, very quietly. “Count Olaf murdered him.”

“I thought you might say that,” Quigley said. “I knew something was very wrong when he didn’t return. But what about my siblings? Do you know what happened to them?”

“They’re safe, Quigley,” Violet said. “We think they’re safe. We rescued them from Olaf’s clutches, and they escaped with a man named Hector.”

“Escaped?” Quigley repeated. “Where did they go?”

“We don’t know,” Klaus admitted. “Hector built a self-sustaining hot air mobile home. It was like a flying house, kept in the air by a bunch of balloons, and Hector said it could stay up in the sky forever.”

“We tried to climb aboard,” Violet said, “but Count Olaf managed to stop us.”

“So you don’t know where they are?” Quigley asked.

“I’m afraid not,” Violet said, and patted his hand. “But Duncan and Isadora are intrepid people, Quigley. They survived for quite some time in

Olaf's clutches, taking notes on his schemes and trying to pass on the information to us."

"Violet's right," Klaus said. "I'm sure that wherever they are, they're continuing their research. Eventually, they'll find out you're alive, and they'll come looking for you, just like you went looking for them."

The two Baudelaires looked at one another and shivered. They had been talking about Quigley's family, of course, but they felt as if they were talking about their own. "I'm sure that if your parents are alive, they're looking for you, too," Quigley said, as if he'd read their minds. "And Sunny, too. Do you know where she is?"

"Someplace nearby," Violet said. "She's with Count Olaf, and Olaf wanted to find the headquarters, too."

"Maybe Olaf has already been here," Quigley said, looking around at the wreckage. "Maybe he's the one who burned this place down."

"I don't think so," Klaus said. "He wouldn't have had time to burn this whole place down. We were right on his trail. Plus, I don't think this place burned down all at once."

"Why not?" Quigley said.

"It's too big," Klaus replied. "If the whole headquarters were burning, the sky would be covered in smoke."

"That's true," Violet said. "That much smoke would arouse too much suspicion."

"Where there's smoke," Quigley said, "there's fire."

Violet and Klaus turned to their friend to agree, but Quigley was not looking at the two Baudelaires. He was looking past them, toward the frozen pool and the two frozen tributaries, where the enormous windows of the V.F.D. kitchen had once stood, and where I once chopped broccoli while the woman I loved mixed up a spicy peanut sauce to go with it, and he was pointing up toward the sky, where my associates and I used to watch the volunteer eagles who could spot smoke from a very great distance.

That afternoon, there were no eagles in the skies over the Mortmain Mountains, but as Violet and Klaus stood up and looked in the direction Quigley was pointing, there was something in the sky that caught their attention. Because when Quigley Quagmire said, “Where there’s smoke, there’s fire,” he was not referring to Klaus’s theory about the destruction of V.F.D. headquarters. He was talking about the sight of green smoke, wafting up into the sky from the peak of Mount Fraught, at the top of the slippery slope.

CHAPTER
Nine

The two elder Baudelaires stood for a moment with Quigley, gazing up at the small plume, a word which here means "mysterious cloud of green smoke." After the long, strange story he had told them about surviving the fire and what he had learned about V.F.D., they could scarcely believe that they were confronting another mystery.

"It's a Verdant Flammable Device," Quigley said. "There's someone at the top of the waterfall, sending a signal."

"Yes," Violet said, "but who?"

"Maybe it's a volunteer, who escaped from the fire," Klaus said. "They're signaling to see if there are any other volunteers nearby."

"Or it could be a trap," Quigley said. "They could be luring volunteers up to the peak in order to ambush them. Remember, the codes of V.F.D. are used by both sides of the schism."

"It hardly seems like a code," Violet said. "We know that someone is communicating, but we don't have the faintest idea who they are, or what they're saying."

"This is what it must be like," Klaus said thoughtfully, "when Sunny talks to people who don't know her very well."

At the mention of Sunny's name, the Baudelaires were reminded of how much they missed her. "Whether it's a volunteer or a trap," Violet said, "it might be our only chance to find our sister."

"Or my sister and brother," Quigley said.

"Let's signal back," Klaus said. "Do you still have those Verdant Flammable Devices, Quigley?"

"Of course," Quigley said, taking the box of green tubes out of his backpack, "but Bruce saw my matches and confiscated them, because children shouldn't play with matches."

"Confiscated them?" Klaus said. "Do you think he's an enemy of V.F.D.?"

"If everyone who said that children shouldn't play with matches was an enemy of V.F.D.," Violet said with a smile, "then we wouldn't have a chance of survival."

"But how are we going to light these without matches?" Quigley asked.

Violet reached into her pocket. It was a bit tricky to tie her hair up in a ribbon, as all four drafts in the Valley of Four Drafts were blowing hard, but at last her hair was out of her eyes, and the gears and levers of her inventing mind began to move as she gazed up at the mysterious signal.

But of course this signal was neither a volunteer nor a trap. It was a baby, with unusually large teeth and a way of talking that some people found confusing. When Sunny Baudelaire had said "lox," for example, the members of Count Olaf's troupe had assumed she was simply babbling, rather than explaining how she was going to cook the salmon that the hook-handed man had caught. "Lox" is a word which refers to smoked salmon, and it is a delicious way to enjoy freshly caught fish, particularly if one has the appropriate accoutrements, a phrase which here means "bagels, cream cheese, sliced cucumber, black pepper, and capers, which can be eaten along with the lox for an enjoyable meal." Lox also has an additional benefit of producing quite a bit of smoke as it is prepared, and this is the reason Sunny chose this method of preparing salmon, as opposed to gravlax, which is salmon marinated for several days in a mixture of spices, or sashimi, which is salmon cut into pleasing shapes and simply served raw. Remembering what Count Olaf had said about being able to see everything and everyone from the peak where he had brought her, the youngest Baudelaire realized that the phrase "where there's smoke there's fire" might be able to help her. As Violet and Klaus heard Quigley's extraordinary tale at the bottom of the frozen waterfall, Sunny hurried to prepare lox and send a signal to her siblings, who she hoped were nearby. First, she nudged the Verdant Flammable Device—which she, like everyone at the peak, believed was a cigarette—into a small patch of weeds, in order to increase the smoke. Then she dragged over the covered casserole dish that she had been using as a makeshift bed, and placed the salmon inside it. In no time at all, the fish caught by the hook-handed man were absorbing the heat and smoke from the simmering green tube, and a large plume of green smoke was floating up into the sky above Mount Fraught. Sunny gazed up at the signal she made and couldn't help smiling. The last time she had been separated from her siblings, she had simply waited in the birdcage for them to come and rescue her, but she had grown since then, and was able to take an active part in defeating Count Olaf and his troupe, while still having time to prepare a seafood dish.

"Something smells delicious," said one of the white-faced women, walking by the casserole dish. "I must admit, I had some doubts that an infant should be in charge of the cooking, but your salmon recipe seems like it will be very tasty indeed."

"There's a word for the way she's preparing the fish," the hook-handed man said, "but I can't remember what it is."

"*Lox*," Sunny said, but no one heard her over the sound of Count Olaf storming out of his tent, followed by Esmé and the two sinister visitors. Olaf was clutching the Snicket file and glaring down at Sunny with his shiny, shiny eyes.

"Put that smoke out *at once*!" he ordered. "I thought you were a terrified orphan prisoner, but I'm beginning to think you're a spy!"

“What do you mean, Olaf?” asked the other white-faced woman. “She’s using Esmé’s cigarette to cook us some fish.”

“Someone might see the smoke,” Esmé snarled, as if she had not been smoking herself just moments ago. “Where there’s smoke, there’s fire.”

The man with a beard but no hair picked up a handful of snow and threw it onto the weeds, extinguishing the Verdant Flammable Device. “Who are you signaling to, baby?” he asked, in his strange, hoarse voice. “If you’re a spy, we’re going to toss you off this mountain.”

“Goo goo,” Sunny said, which meant something along the lines of “I’m going to pretend I’m a helpless baby, instead of answering your question.”

“You see?” the white-faced woman said, looking nervously at the man with a beard but no hair. “She’s just a helpless baby.”

“Perhaps you’re right,” said the woman with hair but no beard. “Besides, there’s no reason to toss a baby off a mountain unless you absolutely have to.”

“Babies can come in handy,” Count Olaf agreed. “In fact, I’ve been thinking about recruiting more young people into my troupe. They’re less likely to complain about doing my bidding.”

“But we never complain,” the hook-handed man said. “I try to be as accommodating as possible.”

“Enough chitchat,” said the man with a beard but no hair. “We have a lot of scheming to do, Olaf. I have some information that might help you with your recruiting idea, and according to the Snicket file, there’s one more safe place for the volunteers to gather.”

“The last safe place,” said the sinister woman. “We have to find it and burn it down.”

“And once we do,” Count Olaf said, “the last evidence of our plans will be completely destroyed. We’ll never have to worry about the authorities again.”

“Where is this last safe place?” asked Kevin.

Olaf opened his mouth to answer, but the woman with hair but no beard stopped him with a quick gesture and a suspicious glance down at Sunny. “Not in front of the toothy orphan,” she said, in her deep, deep voice. “If she learned what we were up to, she’d never sleep again, and you need your infant servant full of energy. Send her away, and we’ll make our plans.”

“Of course,” Olaf said, smiling nervously at the sinister visitors. “Orphan, go to my car and remove all of the potato chip crumbs from the interior by blowing as hard as you can.”

“Futil,” Sunny said, which meant something like, “That is an absolutely impossible chore,” but she walked unsteadily toward the car while Olaf’s troupe laughed and gathered around the flat rock to hear the new scheme. Passing the extinguished fire and the covered casserole dish where she would sleep that night, Sunny sighed sadly, thinking that her signal plan must have failed. But when she reached Olaf’s car and gazed down at the frozen waterfall, she saw something that lightened her spirits, a phrase which here means “an identical plume of green smoke, coming from the very bottom of the slope.” The youngest Baudelaire looked down at the smoke and smiled. “Sibling,” she said to herself. Sunny, of course, could not be certain that it was Violet and Klaus who were signaling to her, but she could hope it was so, and hope was enough to cheer her up as she opened the door of the car and began blowing at the crumbs Olaf and his troupe had scattered all over the upholstery.

But at the bottom of the frozen waterfall, the two elder Baudelaires did not feel nearly as hopeful as they stood with Quigley and watched the green smoke disappear from the highest peak.

“Someone put out the Verdant Flammable Device,” Quigley said, holding the green tube to one side so he wouldn’t smell the smoke. “What do you think that means?”

“I don’t know,” Violet said, and sighed. “This isn’t working.”

“Of course it’s working,” Klaus said. “It’s working perfectly. You noticed that the afternoon sun was reflecting off the frozen waterfall, and it gave you the idea to use the scientific principles of the convergence and refraction of light—just like you did on Lake Lachrymose, when we were battling the leeches. So you used Colette’s hand mirror to catch the sun’s rays and reflect them onto the end of the Verdant Flammable Device, so we could light it and send a signal.”

“Klaus is right,” Quigley said. “It couldn’t have worked better.”

“Thank you,” Violet said, “but that’s not what I mean. I mean this code isn’t working. We still don’t know who’s up on the peak, or why they were signaling us, and now the signal has stopped, but we still don’t know what it means.”

“Maybe we should extinguish our Verdant Flammable Device, too,” Klaus said.

“Maybe,” Violet agreed, “or maybe we should go up to the top of the waterfall and see for ourselves who is there.”

Quigley frowned, and took out his commonplace book. “The only way up to the highest peak,” he said, “is the path that the Snow Scouts are taking. We’d have to go back through the Vernacularly Fastened Door, back down the Vertical Flame Diversion, back into the Volunteer Feline Detective cave, rejoin the scouts and hike for a long time.”

“That’s not the only way up to the peak,” Violet said with a smile.

“Yes, it is,” Quigley insisted. “Look at the map.”

“Look at the waterfall,” Violet replied, and all three children looked up at the shiny slope.

“Do you mean,” Klaus said, “that you think you can invent something which can get us up a frozen waterfall?”

But Violet was already tying her hair out of her eyes again, and looking around at the ruins of the V.F.D. headquarters. “I’ll need that ukulele that you took from the caravan,” she said to Klaus, “and that half-melted candelabra over there by the dining room table.”

Klaus took the ukulele from his coat pocket and handed it to his sister, and then walked over to the table to retrieve the strange, melted object. “Unless you need any further assistance,” he said, “I think I might go examine the wreckage of the library and see if any documents have survived. We might as well learn as much from this headquarters as we can.”

“Good idea,” Quigley said, and reached into his backpack. He brought out a notebook much like his own, except it had a dark blue cover. “I have a spare notebook,” he said. “You might be interested in starting a commonplace book of your own.”

“That’s very kind of you,” Klaus said. “I’ll write down anything I find. Do you want to join the search?”

“I think I’ll stay here,” Quigley said, looking at Violet. “I’ve heard quite a bit about Violet Baudelaire’s marvelous inventions, and I’d like to see her at work.”

Klaus nodded, and walked off to the iron archway marking the entrance of the ruined library, while Violet blushed and leaned down to pick up one of the forks that had survived the fire.

It is one of the great sadnesses of the Baudelaire case that Violet never got to meet a man named C. M. Kornbluth, an associate of mine who spent most of his life living and working in the Valley of Four Drafts as a mechanical instructor at the V.F.D. headquarters. Mr. Kornbluth was a quiet and secretive man, so secretive that no one ever knew who he was, where he came from, or even what the C or the M stood for, and he spent much of his time holed up in his dormitory room writing strange stories, or gazing sadly out the windows of the kitchen. The one thing that put Mr. Kornbluth in a good mood would be a particularly promising mechanical student. If a young man showed an interest in deep sea radar, Mr. Kornbluth would take off his glasses and smile. If a young woman brought him a staple gun she had built, Mr. Kornbluth would clap his hands in excitement. And if a pair of twins asked him how to properly reroute some copper wiring, he would take a paper bag out of his pocket and offer some pistachio nuts to anyone who happened to be around. So, when I think of Violet Baudelaire standing in the wreckage of the V.F.D. headquarters, carefully taking the strings off the ukulele and bending some of the forks in half, I can imagine Mr. Kornbluth, even though he and his pistachios are long gone, turning from the window, smiling at the Baudelaire inventor, and saying, “Beatrice, come over here! Look at what this girl is making!”

“What are you making?” Quigley asked.

“Something that will get us up that waterfall,” Violet replied. “I only wish that Sunny were here. Her teeth would be perfect to slice these ukulele strings into halves.”

“I might have something that could help,” Quigley said, looking through his backpack. “When I was in Dr. Orwell’s office, I found these fake fingernails. They’re a horrible shade of pink, but they’re quite sharp.”

Violet took a fingernail from Quigley and looked at it carefully. “I think Count Olaf was wearing these,” she said, “as part of his receptionist disguise. It’s so strange that you have been following in our footsteps all this time, and yet we never even knew you were alive.”

“I knew you were alive,” Quigley said. “Jacques Snicket told me all about you, Klaus, Sunny, and even your parents. He knew them quite well before you were born.”

“I thought so,” Violet said, cutting the ukulele strings. “In the photograph we found, my parents are standing with Jacques Snicket and another man.”

“He’s probably Jacques’s brother,” Quigley said. “Jacques told me that he was working closely with his two siblings on an important file.”

“The Snicket file,” Violet said. “We were hoping to find it here.”

Quigley looked up at the frozen waterfall. “Maybe whoever signaled us will know where it is,” he said.

“We’ll find out soon enough,” Violet said. “Please take off your shoes.”

“My shoes?” Quigley asked.

“The waterfall will be very slippery,” Violet explained, “so I’m using the ukulele strings to tie these bent forks to the toe area, to make fork-assisted climbing shoes. We’ll hold two more forks in our hands. Tines of the forks are almost as sharp as Sunny’s teeth, so the fork-assisted climbing shoes will easily dig into the ice with each step, and enable us to keep our balance.”

“But what’s the candelabra for?” Quigley asked, unlacing his shoes.

“I’m going to use it as an ice tester,” Violet said. “A moving body of water, such as a waterfall, is rarely completely frozen. There are probably places on that slope where there is only a thin layer of ice, particularly with False Spring on its way. If we stuck our forks through the ice and hit water, we’d lose our grip and fall. So I’ll tap on the ice with the candelabra before each step, to find the solid places we should climb.”

“It sounds like a difficult journey,” Quigley said.

“No more difficult than climbing up the Vertical Flame Diversion,” Violet said, tying a fork onto Quigley’s shoe. “I’m using the Sumac knot, so it should hold tight. Now, all we need is Klaus’s shoes, and—”

“I’m sorry to interrupt, but I think this might be important,” Klaus said, and Violet turned to see that her brother had returned. He was holding the dark blue notebook in one hand and a small, burnt piece of paper in the other. “I found this scrap of paper in a pile of ashes,” he said. “It’s from some kind of code book.”

“What does it say?” Violet asked.

“‘In the e flagration resulting in the destruction of a sanc,’” Klaus read, “‘ teers should avail themselves of Verbal Fri Dialogue, which is concealed accordingly.’”

“That doesn’t make any sense,” Quigley said. “Do you think it’s in code?”

“Sort of,” Klaus said. “Parts of the sentence are burned away, so you have to figure the sentence out as if it’s encoded. ‘Flagration’ is probably the last part of the word ‘conflagration,’ a fancy word for fire, and ‘sanc’ is probably the beginning of the word ‘sanctuary,’ which means a safe place. So the sentence probably began something like, ‘In the event of a conflagration resulting in the destruction of a sanctuary.’”

Violet stood up and looked over his shoulder. “‘Teers,’” she said, “is probably ‘volunteers,’ but I don’t know what ‘avail themselves’ means.”

“It means ‘to make use of,’” Klaus said, “like you’re availing yourself of the ukulele and those forks. Don’t you see? This says that in case a safe place burns down, they’ll leave some sort of message—‘Verbal Fri Dialogue.’”

“But what could ‘Verbal Fri Dialogue’ be?” Quigley asked. “Friends? Frisky?”

“Frilly?” Violet guessed. “Frightening?”

“But it says that it’s concealed accordingly,” Klaus pointed out. “That means that the dialogue is hidden in a logical way. If it were Verbal Waterfall Dialogue, it would be hidden in the waterfall. So none of those words can be right. Where would someone leave a message where fire couldn’t destroy it?”

“But fire destroys everything,” Violet said. “Look at the headquarters. Nothing is left standing except the library entrance, and…”

“…and the refrigerator,” Klaus finished. “Or, we might say, the fridge.”

“Verbal Fridge Dialogue!” Quigley said.

“The volunteers left a message,” said Klaus, who was already halfway to the refrigerator, “in the only place they knew wouldn’t be affected by the fire.”

“And the one place their enemies wouldn’t think of looking,” Quigley said. “After all, there’s never anything terribly important in the refrigerator.”

What Quigley said, of course, is not entirely true. Like an envelope, a hollow figurine, and a coffin, a refrigerator can hold all sorts of things, and they may turn out to be very important depending on what kind of day you are having. A refrigerator may hold an icepack, for example, which would be important if you had been wounded. A refrigerator may hold a bottle of water, which would be important if you were dying of thirst. And a refrigerator may hold a basket of strawberries, which would be important if a maniac said to you, “If you don’t give me a basket of strawberries right now, I’m going to poke you with this large stick.” But when the two elder Baudelaires and Quigley Quagmire opened the refrigerator, they found nothing that would help someone who was wounded, dying of thirst, or being threatened by a strawberry-crazed, stick-carrying maniac, or anything that looked important at all. The fridge was mostly empty, with just a few of the usual things people keep in their refrigerators and rarely use, including a jar of mustard, a container of olives, three jars of different kinds of jam, a bottle of lemon juice, and one lonely pickle in a small glass jug.

“There’s nothing here,” Violet said.

“Look in the crisper,” Quigley said, pointing to a drawer in the refrigerator traditionally used for storing fruits and vegetables. Klaus opened the drawer and pulled out a few strands of a green plant with tiny, skinny leaves.

“It smells like dill,” Klaus said, “and it’s quite crisp, as if it were picked yesterday.”

“Very Fresh Dill,” Quigley said.

“Another mystery,” Violet said, and tears filled her eyes. “We have nothing but mysteries. We don’t know where Sunny is. We don’t know where Count Olaf is. We don’t know who’s signaling to us at the top of the waterfall, or what they’re trying to say, and now there’s a mysterious message in a mysterious code in a mysterious refrigerator, and a bunch of mysterious herbs in the crisper. I’m tired of mysteries. I want someone to help us.”

“We can help each other,” Klaus said. “We have your inventions, and Quigley’s maps, and my research.”

“And we’re all very well-read,” Quigley said. “That should be enough to solve any mystery.”

Violet sighed, and kicked at something that lay on the ashen ground. It was the small shell of a pistachio nut, blackened from the fire that destroyed the headquarters. “It’s like we’re members of V.F.D. already,” she said. “We’re sending signals, and breaking codes, and finding secrets in the ruins of a fire.”

“Do you think our parents would be proud of us,” Klaus asked, “for following in their footsteps?”

“I don’t know,” Violet said. “After all, they kept V.F.D. a secret.”

“Maybe they were going to tell us later,” Klaus said.

“Or maybe they hoped we would never find out,” Violet said.

“I keep wondering the same thing,” Quigley said. “If I could travel back in time to the moment my mother showed me the secret passageway under the library, I would ask her why she was keeping these secrets.”

“That’s one more mystery,” Violet said sadly, and looked up at the slippery slope. It was getting later and later in the afternoon, and the frozen waterfall looked less and less shiny in the fading sunlight, as if time were running out to climb to the top and see who had been signaling to them. “We should each investigate the mystery we’re most likely to solve,” she said. “I’ll climb up the waterfall, and solve the mystery of the Verdant Flammable Device by learning who’s up there, and what they want. You should stay down here, Klaus, and solve the mystery of the Verbal Fridge Dialogue, by learning the code and discovering what the message is.”

“And I’ll help you both,” Quigley said, taking out his purple notebook. “I’ll leave my commonplace book with Klaus, in case it’s any help with the codes. And I’ll climb up the waterfall with you, Violet, in case you need my help.”

“Are you sure?” Violet asked. “You’ve already taken us this far, Quigley. You don’t have to risk your life any further.”

“We’ll understand,” Klaus said, “if you want to leave and search for your siblings.”

“Don’t be absurd,” Quigley said. “We’re all part of this mystery, whatever it is. Of course I’m going to help you.”

The two Baudelaires looked at one another and smiled. It is so rare in this world to meet a trustworthy person who truly wants to help you, and finding such a person can make you feel warm and safe, even if you are in the middle of a windy valley high up in the mountains. For a moment, as their friend smiled back at them, it seemed as if all the mysteries had been solved already, even with Sunny still separated from them, and Count Olaf still at large, and the abandoned V.F.D. headquarters still in ashes around them. Just knowing that they had found a person like Quigley Quagmire made Violet and Klaus feel as if every code made sense, and every signal was clear.

Violet stepped forward, her fork-assisted climbing shoes making small, determined noises on the ground, and took Quigley’s hand. “Thank you,” she said, “for volunteering.”

CHAPTER
Ten

Violet and Quigley walked carefully across the frozen pool until they reached the bottom of the waterfall. “Good luck!” Klaus called, from the archway of the ruined library. He was polishing his glasses, as he often did before embarking on serious research.

“Good luck to you!” Violet replied, shouting over the rush of the mountain winds, and as she looked back at her brother, she remembered when the two siblings were trying to stop the caravan as it hurtled down the mountain. Klaus had wanted to say something to her, in case the drag chute and the mixture of sticky substances hadn’t worked. Violet had the same feeling now, as she prepared to climb the frozen waterfall and leave her brother behind at the ashy remains of the V.F.D. headquarters. “Klaus—” she said.

Klaus put his glasses on and gave his sister his bravest smile. “Whatever you’re thinking of saying,” he said, “say it when you return.”

Violet nodded, and tapped the candelabra against a spot on the ice. She heard a deep *thunk!*, as if she were tapping something very solid. “We’ll start here,” she said to Quigley. “Brace yourself.”

The expression “brace yourself,” as I’m sure you know, does not mean to take some metal wiring and rivets and other orthodontic materials and apply them to your own teeth in order to straighten them. The expression simply means “get ready for something that will probably be difficult,” and it was indeed very difficult to climb a frozen waterfall in the middle of a windswept valley with nothing but a candelabra and a few well-placed forks to aid the two children in their climb. It took a few moments for Violet and Quigley to work her invention properly, and push the forks into the ice just far enough to hold them there, but not so far that they would be permanently stuck, and once both of them were in position, Violet had to reach up as far as she could and tap the candelabra on the ice above them to find the next solid place to climb. For the first few steps, it seemed like ascending the icy slope in this manner would be impossible, but as time went on, and the two volunteers grew more and more skillful with the fork-tipped climbing shoes and the candelabra ice-tester, it became clear that once again Violet’s inventing skills would carry the day, a phrase which here means “enable Violet Baudelaire and Quigley Quagmire to climb up a frozen waterfall after bracing themselves for the difficult journey.”

“Your invention is working,” Quigley called up to Violet. “These fork-assisted climbing shoes are marvelous.”

“They do seem to be working,” Violet agreed, “but let’s not celebrate just yet. We have a long way to go.”

“My sister wrote a couplet about that very thing,” Quigley said, and recited Isadora’s poem:

“Celebrate when you’re half-done,

And the finish won’t be half as fun.”

Violet smiled, and reached up to test the ice above her. “Isadora is a good poet,” Violet said, “and her poems have come in handy more than once. When we were at the Village of Fowl Devotees, she led us to her location by hiding a secret message in a series of couplets.”

“I wonder if that’s a code she learned from V.F.D.,” Quigley said, “or if she made it up herself.”

“I don’t know,” Violet said thoughtfully. “She and Duncan were the first to tell us about V.F.D., but it never occurred to me that they might already be members. When I think about it, however, the code she used was similar to one that our Aunt Josephine used. They both hid a secret location within a note, and waited for us to discover the hidden message. Maybe they were all volunteers.” She removed her left fork-assisted climbing shoe from the ice, and kicked it back in a few inches up to further her climb. “Maybe all our guardians have been members of V.F.D., on one side or the other of the schism.”

“It’s hard to believe,” Quigley said, “that we’ve always been surrounded by people carrying out secret errands, and never known it.”

“It’s hard to believe that we’re climbing a frozen waterfall in the Mortmain Mountains,” Violet replied, “and yet, here we are. There, Quigley, do you see the ledge where my left fork is? It’s solid enough for both of us to sit for a moment and catch our breath.”

“Good,” Quigley said. “I have a small bag of carrots in my backpack we can eat to regain our energy.” The triplet climbed up to where Violet was sitting, on a small ledge scarcely the size of a sofa, and slid so he was sitting next to her. The two climbers could see that they had traveled farther than they’d thought. Far below them were the blackened ruins of the headquarters, and Klaus was only a small speck near a tiny iron archway. Quigley handed Violet a carrot, and she bit down on it thoughtfully.

“Sunny loves raw carrots,” Violet said. “I hope that she’s eating well, wherever she is.”

“I hope my siblings are eating well, too,” Quigley said. “My father always used to say that a good meal can cheer one up considerably.”

“My father always said the same thing,” Violet said, looking at Quigley curiously. “Do you think *that* was a code, too?”

Quigley shrugged and sighed. Small bits of ice from the waterfall fell from the ends of forks and blew away in the wind. “It’s like we never really knew our parents,” he said.

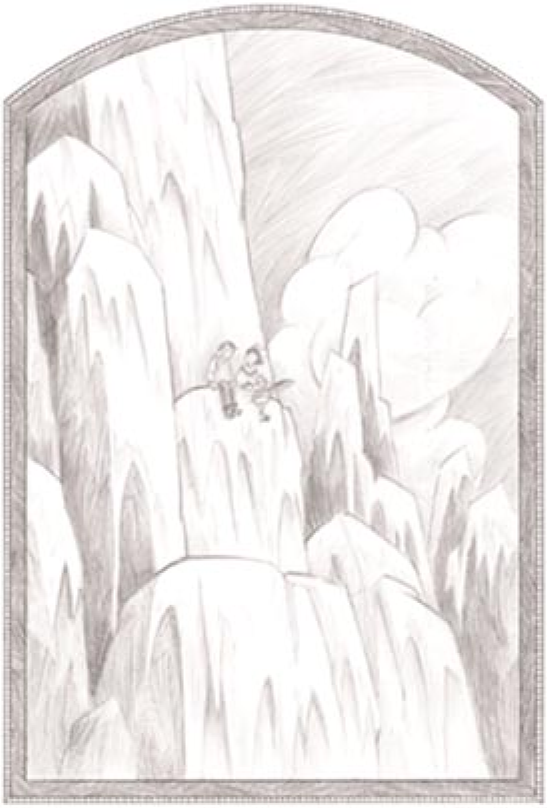
“We knew them,” Violet said. “They just had a few secrets, that’s all. Everyone should keep a few secrets.”

“I suppose so,” Quigley said, “but they might have mentioned that they were in a secret organization with a headquarters hidden in the Mortmain Mountains.”

“Maybe they didn’t want us to find out about such a dangerous place,” Violet said, peering off the ledge, “although if you have to hide a headquarters, it’s a beautiful place to do it. Aside from the remains of the fire, this is a very lovely view.”

“Very lovely indeed,” Quigley said, but he was not looking at the view beneath him. He was looking beside him, where Violet Baudelaire was sitting.

Many things have been taken from the three Baudelaires. Their parents were taken, of course, and their home was taken from them, by a terrible fire. Their various guardians were taken from them, because they were murdered by Count Olaf or were simply miserable guardians who soon lost interest in three young children with nowhere to go. The Baudelaires’ dignity was taken from them, on the occasions when the siblings were forced to wear absurd disguises, and recently they had been taken from one another, with the kidnapped Sunny doing chores at the top of the frozen waterfall while Violet and Klaus learned the secrets of V.F.D. at the bottom. But one thing that was taken from the Baudelaires that is not often discussed is their privacy, a word which here means “time by oneself, without anyone watching or interfering.” Unless you are a hermit or half of a pair of Siamese twins, you probably enjoy taking the occasional break from members of your family to enjoy some privacy, perhaps with a friend or companion, in your room or in a railway car you have managed to sneak aboard. But since that dreadful day at Briny Beach, when Mr. Poe arrived to tell the Baudelaires that their parents had perished, the three children had scarcely had any privacy at all. From the small, dark bedroom where they slept at Count Olaf's house, to the crowded caravan at Caligari Carnival, and all of the other woeful places in between, the Baudelaires' situation was always so desperate and cramped that they were rarely able to spare a moment for a bit of private time.



So, as Violet and Quigley rest for a few minutes more on a ledge halfway up the frozen waterfall, I will take this opportunity to give them a bit of privacy, by not writing down anything more of what happened between these two friends on that chilly afternoon. Certainly there are aspects of my own personal life that I will never write down, however precious they are to me, and I will offer the eldest Baudelaire the same courtesy. I will tell you that the two young people resumed their climb, and that the afternoon slowly turned to evening and that both Violet and

Quigley had small secret smiles on their faces as the candelabra ice-tester and the fork-assisted climbing shoes helped them both get closer and closer to the mountains' highest peak, but there has been so little privacy in the life of Violet Baudelaire that I will allow her to keep a few important moments to herself, rather than sharing them with my distressed and weeping readers.

"We're almost there," Violet said. "It's difficult to see with the sun going down, but I believe we're just about at the top of the peak."

"I can't believe we've been climbing all afternoon," Quigley said.

"Not *all* afternoon," she reminded him with a shy smile. "I guess this waterfall is about as high as 667 Dark Avenue. It took a very long time to go up and down that elevator shaft, trying to rescue your siblings. I hope this is a more successful journey."

"Me, too," Quigley said. "What do you think we will find at the top?"

"Set!" came the reply.

"I couldn't hear you over the wind," Quigley said. "What did you say?"

"I didn't say anything," Violet said. She squinted above her, trying to see in the last of the sunset, and scarcely daring to hope that she had heard correctly.

Out of all the words in the English language, the word "set" has the most definitions, and if you open a good dictionary and read the word's long, long entry, you will begin to think that "set" is scarcely a word at all, only a sound that means something different depending on who is saying it. If a group of jazz musicians says "set," for instance, they are probably referring to the songs they are planning to play at a club that evening, assuming it doesn't burn down. If the owner of a restaurant uses the word "set," they might mean a group of matching wineglasses, or a bunch of waitresses who look exactly alike. A librarian will say "set" to refer to a collection of books that are all by the same author or about the same subject, and an Egyptologist will use the word "set" to refer to the ancient god of evil, although he does not come up very often in conversation. But when Violet heard the word “set” from the top of Mount Fraught, she did not think there was a group of jazz musicians, a restaurant owner, a librarian, or an Egyptologist talking about jazz tunes, wineglasses, waitresses, thematically linked books, or a black, immoral aardvark who is the sworn enemy of the god Osiris. She reached her fork as high as she could so she could climb closer, and saw the rays of the sunset reflect off a large tooth, and Violet knew that this time, the definition of “set” was “I knew you would find me!” and the speaker was Sunny Baudelaire.

“Set!” Sunny said again.

“Sunny!” Violet cried.

“Sssh!” Sunny said.

“What is going on?” Quigley asked, several forksteps behind Violet.

“It’s Sunny,” Violet said, and hoisted herself onto the peak to see her baby sister, standing next to Count Olaf’s car and grinning from ear to ear. Without another word, the two Baudelaire sisters hugged fiercely, Violet taking care not to poke Sunny with one of the forks she was holding. By the time Quigley reached the top of the peak and pulled himself up to lean against one of the car’s tires, the two Baudelaires were smiling at each other with tears in their eyes.

“I knew we’d see you again, Sunny,” Violet said. “I just knew it.”

“Klaus?” Sunny asked.

“He’s safe and nearby,” Violet said. “He knew we could find you, too.”

“Set,” Sunny agreed, but then she noticed Quigley and her eyes grew wide. “Quagmire?” she asked in amazement.

“Yes,” Violet said. “This is Quigley Quagmire, Sunny. He survived the fire after all.” Sunny walked unsteadily over to Quigley and shook his hand. “He led us to the headquarters, Sunny, with a map he drew himself.”

“Arigato,” Sunny said, which meant something like, “I appreciate your help, Quigley.”

“Was it you who signaled us?” Quigley asked.

“Yep,” Sunny said. “Lox.”

“Count Olaf’s been making you do the cooking?” Violet asked in amazement.

“Vaccurum,” Sunny said.

“Olaf even made her clean crumbs out of the car,” Violet translated to Quigley, “by blowing as hard as she could.”

“That’s ridiculous!” Quigley said.

“Cinderella,” Sunny said. She meant something along the lines of, “I’ve had to do all of the chores, while being humiliated at every turn,” but Violet had no time to translate over the sound of Count Olaf’s scratchy voice.

“Where are you, Babylaire?” he asked, adding an absurd nickname to his list of insults. “I’ve thought of more tasks for you to perform.”

The three children looked at one another in panic. “Hide,” Sunny whispered, and there was no need for translation. Violet and Quigley looked around the desolate landscape of the peak for a place to hide, but there was only one place to go.

“Under the car,” Violet said, and she and Quigley wriggled underneath the long, black automobile, which was as dirty and smelly as its owner. As an inventor, the eldest Baudelaire had stared closely at automotive machinery plenty of times, but she had never seen such an extreme state of disrepair, a phrase which here means “an underside of an automobile in such bad shape that it was dripping oil on her and her companion.” But Violet and Quigley didn’t have a moment to waste thinking of their discomfort. They had no sooner moved their fork-assisted climbing shoes out of view when Count Olaf and his companions arrived. From underneath the car, the two volunteers could see only the villain's tattoo on the filthy ankle above his left shoe, and a pair of very stylish pumps, decorated with glitter and tiny paintings of eyes, that could only belong to Esmé Squalor.

"All we've had to eat all day is that smoked salmon, and it's almost dinnertime," Count Olaf said. "You'd better get cooking, orphan."

"Tomorrow is False Spring," Esmé said, "and it would be very in to have a False Spring dinner."

"Did you hear that, toothy?" Olaf asked. "My girlfriend wants a stylish dinner. Get to work."

"Olaf, we need you," said a very deep voice, and Violet and Quigley saw two pairs of sinister black shoes appear behind the villain and his girlfriend, whose shoes twitched nervously at the sight of them. All of a sudden, it seemed much colder underneath the car, and Violet had to push her legs against the tires, so they would not shiver against the mechanics of the underside and be heard.

"Yes, Olaf," agreed the hoarse voice of the man with a beard but no hair, although Violet and Quigley could not see him. "Our recruitment plan will happen first thing in the morning, so we need you to help spread the net out on the ground."

"Can't you ask one of our employees?" asked Esmé. "There's the hook-handed man, the two white-faced women, and the three freaks we picked up at the carnival. That's eight people, if you include yourselves, to spread out the net. Why should we do it?"

The four black shoes stepped toward Esme's stylish pumps and Olaf's tattoo. "You'll do it," said the woman with hair but no beard, "because I say so."

There was a long, ominous pause, and then Count Olaf gave a little high-pitched laugh. "That's a good point," he said. "Come on, Esmé. We've bossed around the baby, so there's nothing else to do around here anyway."

“That’s true,” Esmé agreed. “In fact, I was thinking about taking up smoking again, because I’m bored. Do you have any more of those green cigarettes?”

“I’m afraid not,” replied the man with a beard but no hair, leading the villains away from the car. “That’s the only one I found.”

“That’s too bad,” Esmé said. “I don’t like the taste or the smell, and they’re very bad for you, but cigarettes are very in and I’d like to smoke another one.”

“Maybe there’s another one in the ruins of headquarters,” said the woman with hair but no beard. “It’s hard to find everything in all those ashes. We searched for days and couldn’t find the sugar bowl.”

“Not in front of the baby,” Olaf said quickly, and the four pairs of shoes walked away. Violet and Quigley stayed underneath the car until Sunny said “Coastkleer,” which meant something like, “It’s safe to come out now.”

“Those were terrible people,” Quigley said with a shudder, brushing oil and grime off his coat. “They made me feel cold all over.”

“They certainly had an aura of menace,” Violet agreed in a whisper. “The feet with the tattoo were Count Olaf, and those glittery shoes were Esmé Squalor, but who were the other two, Sunny?”

“Unno Narsonist,” Sunny murmured. She meant something along the lines of “I don’t know, but they burned down V.F.D. headquarters,” and Violet was quick to explain this to Quigley.

“Klaus has found an important message that survived the fire,” Violet said. “By the time we take you down the waterfall, I’m sure he’ll have decoded the message. Come on.”

“Nogo,” Sunny said, which meant “I don’t think I ought to accompany you.”

“Why on earth not?” Violet asked.

"Unasanc," Sunny said.

"Sunny says that the villains have mentioned one more safe place for volunteers to gather," Violet explained to Quigley.

"Do you know where it is?" Quigley asked.

Sunny shook her head. "Olafile," she said.

"But if Count Olaf has the Snicket file," Violet said, "how are you going to find out where this safe place is?"

"Matahari," she said, which meant something like, "If I stay, I can spy on them and find out."

"Absolutely not," Violet said, after she had translated. "It's not safe for you to stay here, Sunny. It's bad enough that Olaf has made you do the cooking."

"Lox," Sunny pointed out.

"But what are you going to make for a False Spring dinner?" Violet asked.

Sunny gave her sister a smile, and walked over to the trunk of the car. Violet and Quigley heard her rummaging around among the remaining groceries, but stayed put so Olaf or any of his associates wouldn't spot them. When Sunny returned, she had a triumphant smile on her face, and the frozen hunk of spinach, the large bag of mushrooms, the can of water chestnuts, and the enormous eggplant in her arms. "False spring rolls!" she said, which meant something like, "An assortment of vegetables wrapped in spinach leaves, prepared in honor of False Spring."

"I'm surprised you can even carry that eggplant, let alone prepare it," Violet said. "It must weigh as much as you do."

"Suppertunity," Sunny said. She meant something like, "Serving the troupe dinner will be a perfect chance to listen to their conversation," and Violet reluctantly translated.

“It sounds dangerous,” Quigley said.

“Of course it’s dangerous,” Violet said. “If she’s caught spying, who knows what they’ll do?”

“Ga ga goo goo,” Sunny said, which meant “I won’t be caught, because they think I’m only a helpless baby.”

“I think your sister is right,” Quigley said. “It wouldn’t be safe to carry her down the waterfall, anyway. We need our hands and feet for the climb. Let Sunny investigate the mystery she’s most likely to solve, while we work on an escape plan.”

Violet shook her head. “I don’t want to leave my sister behind,” she said. “The Baudelaires should never be separated.”

“Separate Klaus,” Sunny pointed out.

“If there’s another place where volunteers are gathering,” Quigley said, “we need to know where it is. Sunny can find out for us, but only if she stays here.”

“I’m not going to leave my baby sister on top of a mountain,” Violet said.

Sunny dropped her vegetables on the ground and walked over to her sister and smiled. “I’m not a baby,” Sunny said, and hugged her. It was the longest sentence the youngest Baudelaire had ever said, and as Violet looked down at her sister, she saw how true it was. Sunny was not really a baby, not anymore. She was a young girl with unusually sharp teeth, some impressive cooking skills, and an opportunity to spy on a group of villains and discover a piece of crucial information. Sometime, during the unfortunate events that had befallen the three orphans, Sunny had grown out of her babyhood, and although it made Violet a bit sad to think about it, it made her proud, too, and she gave her sister a smile.

“I guess you’re right,” Violet said. “You’re not a baby. But be careful, Sunny. You’re a young girl, but it’s still quite dangerous for a young girl to spy on villains. And remember, we're right at the bottom of the slope, Sunny. If you need us, just signal again."

Sunny opened her mouth to reply, but before she could utter a sound, the three children heard a long, lazy hissing noise from underneath Olaf's car, as if one of Dr. Montgomery's snakes were hiding there. The car shifted lightly, and Violet pointed to one of Olaf's tires, which had gone flat. "I must have punctured it," Violet said, "with my fork-assisted climbing shoes."

"I suppose that's not a nice thing to do," Quigley said, "but I can't say I'm sorry."

"How's dinner coming along, toothface?" called Count Olaf's cruel voice over the sound of the wind.

"I guess we'd better leave before we're discovered," Violet said, giving her sister one more hug and a kiss on the top of her head. "We'll see you soon, Sunny."

"Good-bye, Sunny," Quigley said. "I'm so glad we finally met in person. And thank you very much for helping us find the last safe place."

Sunny Baudelaire looked up at Quigley, and then at her older sister, and gave them both a big, happy smile that showed all of her impressive teeth. After spending so much time in the company of villains, she was happy to be with some people who respected her skills, appreciated her work, and understood her way of speaking. Even with Klaus still at the bottom of the waterfall, Sunny felt as if she had already been happily reunited with her family, and that her time in the Mortmain Mountains would have a happy ending. She was wrong about that, of course, but for now the youngest Baudelaire smiled up at these two people who cared about her, one she had just met and one she had known her entire life, and felt as if she were growing taller at that very moment.

"Happy," said the young girl, and everyone who heard her knew what she was talking about.

CHAPTER
Eleven

If you ever look at a picture of someone who has just had an idea, you might notice a drawing of a lightbulb over the person's head. Of course, there is not usually a lightbulb hovering in the air when someone has an idea, but the image of a lightbulb over someone's head has become a sort of symbol for thinking, just as the image of an eye, sadly, has become a symbol for crime and devious behavior rather than integrity, the prevention of fire, and being well-read. As Violet and Quigley climbed back down the slippery slope of the frozen waterfall, their fork-assisted climbing shoes poking into the ice with each step, they looked down and saw, by the last light of the setting sun, the figure of Klaus. He was holding a flashlight over his head to help the two climbers find their way down, but it looked as if he'd just had an idea.

“He must have found a flashlight in the wreckage,” Quigley said. “It looks like the one Jacques gave me.”

“I hope he found enough information to decode Verbal Fridge Dialogue,” Violet said, and tapped the candelabra below her feet. “Be careful here, Quigley. The ice feels thin. We’ll have to climb around it.”

“The ice has been less solid on our way down,” Quigley said.

“That’s not surprising,” Violet said. “We’ve poked a great deal of it with forks. By the time False Spring arrives, this whole slope will probably only be half frozen.”

“By the time False Spring arrives,” Quigley said, “I hope we’ll be on our way to the last safe place.”

“Me, too,” Violet said quietly, and the two climbers said no more until they reached the bottom of the waterfall and walked carefully across the frozen pool along the path Klaus shone with his flashlight.

“I’m so glad you returned in one piece,” Klaus said, shining his flashlight in the direction of the dining room remains. “It looked like a very slippery journey. It’s getting cold, but if we sit behind the library entrance, we’ll be away from much of the wind.”

But Violet was so eager to tell her brother who they had found at the top of the peak that she could not wait another moment. “It’s Sunny,” she said. “Sunny’s at the top. It was her who was signaling us.”

“Sunny?” Klaus said, his eyes as wide as his smile. “How did she get up there? Is she safe? Why didn’t you bring her back?”

“She’s safe,” Violet said. “She’s with Count Olaf, but she’s safe.”

“Has he harmed her?” Klaus asked.

Violet shook her head. “No,” she said. “He’s making her do all the cooking and cleaning.”

“But she’s a baby!” Klaus said.

“Not anymore,” Violet said. “We haven’t noticed, Klaus, but she’s grown up quite a bit. She’s really too young to be in charge of all the chores, of course, but sometime, during all the hardship we’ve been through, she stopped being a baby.”

“She’s old enough to eavesdrop,” Quigley said. “She’s already discovered who burned down the V.F.D. headquarters.”

“They’re two terrible people, a man and a woman, who have quite an aura of menace,” Violet said. “Even Count Olaf is a little afraid of them.”

“What are they all doing up there?” Klaus asked.

“They’re having some sort of villainous meeting,” Quigley said. “We heard them mention something about a recruitment plan, and a large net.”

“That doesn’t sound pleasant,” Klaus said.

“There’s more, Klaus,” Violet said. “Count Olaf has the Snicket file, and he found out about some secret location—the last safe place where the V.F.D. can gather. That’s why Sunny stayed up there. If she overhears where the place is, we’ll know where to go to meet up with the rest of the volunteers.”

“I hope she manages to find out,” Klaus said. “Without that piece of information, all that I’ve discovered is useless.”

“What have you discovered?” Quigley asked.

“I’ll show you,” Klaus said, and led the way to the ruins of the library, where Violet could see he’d been working. His dark blue notebook was open, and she could see that several pages were filled with notes. Nearby were several half-burnt scraps of paper, stacked underneath a burnt teacup Klaus was using for a paperweight, and all of the contents of the refrigerator were laid out in a careful half circle: the jar of mustard, the container of olives, three jars of jam, and the very fresh dill. The small glass jug, containing one pickle, and the bottle of lemon juice were off to one side. “This is some of the most difficult research I’ve ever done,” Klaus said, sitting down next to his notebook. “Justice Strauss’s legal library was confusing, and Aunt Josephine’s grammatical library was dull, but the ruined V.F.D. library is a much bigger challenge. Even if I know what book I’m looking for, it may be nothing but ashes.”

“Did you find anything about Verbal Fridge Dialogue?” Quigley asked, sitting beside him.

“Not at first,” Klaus said. “The scrap of paper that led us to the refrigerator was in a large pile of ashes, and it took awhile to sift through it. But I finally found one page that was probably from the same book.” He reached for his notebook and held up his flashlight so he could see the pages. “The page was so delicate,” he said, “that I immediately copied it into my commonplace book. It explains how the whole code works.”

“Read it to us,” Violet said, and Klaus complied, a word which here means “followed Violet’s suggestion and read a very complicated paragraph out loud, explaining it as he went along.”

"'Verbal Fridge Dialogue,'" he read, "'is an emergency communication system that avails itself of the more esoteric products in a refrigerator. Volunteers will know such a code is being used by the presence of very fr—'" He looked up from his notebook. "The sentence ends there," he said, "but I assume that 'very fr' is the beginning of 'very fresh dill.' If very fresh dill is in the refrigerator, that means there's a message there, too."

"I understand that part," Violet said, "but what does 'esoteric' mean?"

"In this case," Klaus said, "I think it refers to things that aren't used very much—the things that stay in the refrigerator for a long time."

"Like mustard and jam and things like that," Violet said. "I understand."

"'The receiver of the message should find his or her initials, as noted by one of our poet volunteers, as follows,'" Klaus continued. "And then there's a short poem:

"The darkest of the jams of three

contains within the addressee."

"That's a couplet," Quigley said, "like my sister writes."

"I don't think your sister wrote that particular poem," Violet said. "This code was probably invented before your sister was born."

"That's what I thought," Klaus said, "but it made me wonder who taught Isadora about couplets. They might have been a volunteer."

"She had a poetry teacher when we were young," Quigley said, "but I never met him. I always had cartography class."

"And your mapmaking skills," Violet said, "led us to the headquarters."

"And your inventing skills," Klaus said, "allowed you to climb up to Mount Fraught."

“And your researching skills are helping us now,” Violet said. “It’s as if we were being trained for all this, and we didn’t even know it.”

“I never thought of learning about maps as training,” Quigley said. “I just liked it.”

“Well, I haven’t had much training in poetry,” Klaus said, “but the couplet seems to say that inside the darkest jar of jam is the name of the person who’s supposed to get the message.”

Violet looked down at the three jars of jam. “There’s apricot, strawberry, and boysenberry,” she said. “Boysenberry’s the darkest.”

Klaus nodded, and unscrewed the cap from the jar of boysenberry jam. “Look inside,” he said, and shined the flashlight so Violet and Quigley could see. Someone had taken a knife and written two letters in the surface of the jam: J and S.

“J.S.,” Quigley said. “Jacques Snicket.”

“The message can’t be for Jacques Snicket,” Violet said. “He’s dead.”

“Maybe whoever wrote this message doesn’t know that,” Klaus said, and continued to read from the commonplace book. “‘If necessary, the dialogue uses a cured, fruit-based calendar for days of the week in order to announce a gathering. Sunday is represented by a lone—’ Here it’s cut off again, but I think that means that these olives are an encoded way of communicating which day of the week a gathering will take place, with Sunday being one olive, Monday being two, and so on.”

“How many olives are in that container?” Quigley asked.

“Five,” Klaus said, wrinkling his nose. “I didn’t like counting them. Ever since the Squalors fixed us aqueous martinis, the taste of olives hasn’t really appealed to me.”

“Five olives means Thursday,” Violet said.

“Today’s Friday,” Quigley said. “The gathering of the volunteers is less than a week away.”

The two Baudelaires nodded in agreement, and Klaus opened his notebook again. “‘Any spice-based condiment,’” he read, “‘should have a coded label referring volunteers to encoded poems.’”

“I don’t think I understand,” Quigley said.

Klaus sighed, and reached for the jar of mustard. “This is where it really gets complicated. Mustard is a spice-based condiment, and according to the code, it should refer us to a poem of some sort.”

“How can mustard refer us to a poem?” Violet asked.

Klaus smiled. “I was puzzled for a long time,” he said, “but I finally thought to look at the list of ingredients. Listen to this: ‘Vinegar, mustard seed, salt, tumeric, the final quatrain of the eleventh stanza of “The Garden of Proserpine,” by Algernon Charles Swinburne, and calcium disodium, an allegedly natural preservative.’ A quatrain is four lines of a poem, and a stanza is another word for a verse. They hid a reference to a poem in the list of ingredients.”

“It’s the perfect place to hide something,” Violet said. “No one ever reads those lists very carefully. But did you find the poem?”

Klaus frowned, and lifted the teacup. “Under a burnt wooden sign marked ‘Poetry,’ I found a pile of papers that were burned practically beyond recognition,” he said, “but here’s the one surviving scrap, and it’s the last quatrain of the eleventh stanza of ‘The Garden of Proserpine,’ by Algernon Charles Swinburne.”

“That’s convenient,” Quigley said.

“A little *too* convenient,” Klaus said. “The entire library was destroyed, and the one poem that survived is the one we need. It can’t be a coincidence.” He held out the scrap of paper so Violet and Quigley could see it. “It’s as if someone knew we’d be looking for this.”

“What does the quatrain say?” Violet asked.

“It’s not very cheerful,” Klaus said, and tilted the flashlight so he could read it:

“That no life lives forever;

That dead men rise up never;

That even the weariest river

Winds somewhere safe to sea.”

The children shivered, and moved so they were sitting even closer together on the ground. It had grown darker, and Klaus’s flashlight was pratically the only thing they could see. If you have ever found yourself sitting in darkness with a flashlight, you may have experienced the feeling that something is lurking just beyond the circle of light that a flashlight makes, and reading a poem about dead men is not a good way to make yourself feel better.

“I wish Isadora were here,” Quigley said. “She could tell us what that poem means.”

“Even the weariest river winds somewhere safe to sea,” Violet repeated. “Do you think that refers to the last safe place?”

“I don’t know,” Klaus said. “I couldn’t find anything else that would help us.”

“What about the lemon juice?” Violet asked. “And the pickle?”

Klaus shook his head, although his sister could scarcely see him in the dark. “There might be more to the message,” he said, “but it’s all gone up in smoke. I couldn’t find anything more in the library that seemed helpful.”

Violet took the scrap of paper from her brother and looked at the quatrain. “There’s something very faint here,” she said. “Something written in pencil, but it’s too faint to read.”

Quigley reached into his backpack. “I forgot we have two flashlights,” he said, and shone a second light onto the paper. Sure enough, there was one word, written very faintly in pencil beside the last four lines of the poem’s eleventh stanza. Violet, Klaus, and Quigley leaned in as far as they could to see what it was. The night winds rustled the fragile paper, and made the children shiver, shaking the flashlights, but at last the light shone on the quatrain and they could see what words were there.

“Sugar bowl,” they said in unison, and looked at one another.

“What could that mean?” Klaus asked.

Violet sighed. “When we were hiding underneath the car,” she said to Quigley, “one of those villains said something about searching for a sugar bowl, remember?”

Quigley nodded, and took out his purple notebook. “Jacques Snicket mentioned a sugar bowl once,” he said, “when we were in Dr. Montgomery’s library. He said it was very important to find it. I wrote it down on the top of a page in my commonplace book, so I could add any information I learned about its whereabouts.” He held up the page so the two Baudelaires could see that it was blank. “I never learned anything more,” he said.

Klaus sighed. “It seems that the more we learn, the more mysteries we find. We reached V.F.D. headquarters and decoded a message, and all we know is that there’s one last safe place, and volunteers are gathering there on Thursday.”

“That might be enough,” Violet said, “if Sunny finds out where the safe place is.”

“But how are we going to get Sunny away from Count Olaf?” Klaus asked.

“With your fork-assisted climbing shoes,” Quigley said. “We can climb up there again, and sneak away with Sunny.”

Violet shook her head. “The moment they noticed Sunny was gone,” she said, “they would find us. From Mount Fraught, they can see everything and everyone for miles and miles, and we’re hopelessly outnumbered.”

“That’s true,” Quigley admitted. “There are ten villains up there, and only four of us. Then how are we going to rescue her?”

“Olaf has someone we love,” Klaus said thoughtfully. “If we had something he loves, we could trade it for Sunny’s return. What does Count Olaf love?”

“Money,” Violet said.

“Fire,” Quigley said.

“We don’t have any money,” Klaus said, “and Olaf won’t trade Sunny for a fire. There must be something he really loves—something that makes him happy, and would make him very unhappy if it were taken away.”

Violet and Quigley looked at one another and smiled. “Count Olaf loves Esmé Squalor,” Violet said. “If we were holding Esmé prisoner, we could arrange a trade.”

“That’s true,” Klaus said, “but we’re not holding Esmé prisoner.”

“We could take her prisoner,” Quigley said, and everyone was quiet. Taking someone prisoner, of course, is a villainous thing to do, and when you think of doing a villainous thing—even if you have a very good reason for thinking of doing it—it can make you feel like a villain, too. Lately, the Baudelaires had been doing things like wearing disguises and helping burn down a carnival, and were beginning to feel more and more like villains themselves. But Violet and Klaus had never done anything as villainous as taking somebody prisoner, and as they looked at Quigley they could tell that he felt just as uncomfortable, sitting in the dark and thinking up a villainous plan.

“How would we do it?” Klaus asked quietly.

“We could lure her to us,” Violet said, “and trap her.”

Quigley wrote something down in his commonplace book. “We could use the Verdant Flammable Devices,” he said. “Esmé thinks they’re cigarettes, and she thinks cigarettes are in. If we lit some of them, she might smell the smoke and come down here.”

“But then what?” Klaus asked.

Violet shivered in the cold, and reached into her pocket. Her fingers bumped up against the large bread knife, which she had almost forgotten was there, and then found what she was looking for. She took the ribbon out of her pocket and tied her hair up, to keep it out of her eyes. The eldest Baudelaire could scarcely believe she was using her inventing skills to think up a trap. “The easiest trap to build,” she said, “is a pit. We could dig a deep hole, and cover it up with some of this half-burned wood so Esmé couldn’t see it. The wood has been weakened by the fire, so when she steps on it…”

Violet did not finish her sentence, but by the glow of the flashlights, she could see that Klaus and Quigley were both nodding. “Hunters have used traps like that for centuries,” Klaus said, “to capture wild animals.”

“That doesn’t make me feel any better,” Violet said.

“How could we dig such a pit?” Quigley said.

“Well,” Violet said, “we don’t really have any tools, so we probably have to use our hands. As the pit got deeper, we’d have to use something to carry the dirt away.”

“I still have that pitcher,” Klaus said.

“And we’d need a way to make sure that we wouldn’t get trapped ourselves,” Violet said.

“I have a rope,” Quigley said, “in my backpack. We could tie one end to the archway, and use it to climb out.”

Violet reached her hand down to the ground. The dirt was very cold, but quite loose, and she saw that they could dig a pit without too much trouble. “Is this the right thing to do?” Violet asked. “Do you think this is what our parents would do?”

“Our parents aren’t here,” Klaus said. “They might have been here once, but they’re not here now.”

The children were quiet again, and tried to think as best they could in the cold and the dark. Deciding on the right thing to do in a situation is a bit like deciding on the right thing to wear to a party. It is easy to decide on what is wrong to wear to a party, such as deep-sea diving equipment or a pair of large pillows, but deciding what is right is much trickier. It might seem right to wear a navy blue suit, for instance, but when you arrive there could be several other people wearing the same thing, and you could end up being handcuffed due to a case of mistaken identity. It might seem right to wear your favorite pair of shoes, but there could be a sudden flood at the party, and your shoes would be ruined. And it might seem right to wear a suit of armor to the party, but there could be several other people wearing the same thing, and you could end up being caught in a flood due to a case of mistaken identity, and find yourself drifting out to sea wishing that you were wearing deep-sea diving equipment after all. The truth is that you can never be sure if you have decided on the right thing until the party is over, and by then it is too late to go back and change your mind, which is why the world is filled with people doing terrible things and wearing ugly clothing, and so few volunteers who are able to stop them.

“I don’t know if it’s the right thing to do,” Violet said, “but Count Olaf captured Sunny, and we might have to capture someone ourselves, in order to stop him.”

Klaus nodded solemnly. “We’ll fight fire,” he said, “with fire.”

“Then we’d better get started,” Quigley said, and stood up. “When the sun rises, we can light the Verdant Flammable Devices with the mirror again, like we did when we were signaling Sunny.”

“If we want the pit to be ready by dawn,” Violet said, “we’ll have to dig all night.”

“Where shall we put the pit?” Klaus asked.

“In front of the entrance,” Violet decided. “Then we can hide behind the arch when Esmé approaches.”

“How will we know when she’s fallen in,” Quigley asked, “if we can’t see her?”

“We’ll hear it,” Violet replied. “We’ll hear the breaking of the wood, and Esmé might scream.”

Klaus shuddered. “That’s not going to be a pleasant sound.”

“We’re not in a pleasant situation,” Violet said, and the eldest Baudelaire was right. It was not pleasant to kneel down in front of the ruined library entrance, and dig through the ashes and dirt with their bare hands by the light of two flashlights, as all four drafts of the valley blew around them. It was not pleasant for Violet and her brother to carry the dirt away in the pitcher, while Quigley tied his rope to the iron archway, so they could climb in and out as the pit grew bigger and deeper, like an enormous dark mouth opening wider and wider to swallow them whole. It was not even pleasant to pause and eat a carrot to keep up their energy, or to gaze at the shiny white shape of the frozen waterfall as it glinted in the moonlight, imagining Esmé Squalor, lured by the smoke of the Verdant Flammable Devices, approaching the ruined headquarters to become their prisoner. But the least pleasant part of the situation wasn’t the cold dirt, or the freezing winds, or even their own exhaustion as it grew later and later and the children dug deeper and deeper. The least pleasant part was the idea, shared by the two Baudelaires and their new friend, that they might be doing a villainous thing. The siblings were not sure if digging a deep pit to trap someone, in order to trade prisoners with a villain, was something that their parents or any other volunteers would do, but with so many of the V.F.D. secrets lost in the ashes, it was impossible to know for sure, and this uncertainty haunted them with every pitcherful of dirt, and every climb up the rope, and every piece of weakened wood they laid on top of the pit to hide it from view.

As the first rays of the morning sun appeared on the misty horizon, the elder Baudelaires gazed up at the waterfall. At the summit of the Mortmain Mountains, they knew, was a group of villains, from whom Sunny was hopefully learning the location of the last safe place. But as Violet and Klaus lowered their gaze to their own handiwork, and looked at the dark, deep pit Quigley had helped them dig, they could not help wondering if there were also a group of villains at the bottom of the slippery slope. As they looked at the villainous thing they had made, the three volunteers could not help wondering if they were villains, too, and this was the least pleasant feeling in the world.

CHAPTER
Twelve

Not too long ago, in the Swedish city of Stockholm, a group of bank robbers took a few prisoners during the course of their work. For several days, the bank robbers and the prisoners lived together in close proximity, a word which here means “while the police gathered outside and eventually managed to arrest the robbers and take them to jail.” When the prisoners were finally freed, however, the authorities discovered that they had become friends with the bank robbers, and since that time the expression “Stockholm Syndrome” has been used to describe a situation in which someone becomes friendly with the people who are holding them prisoner.

There is another expression, however, which describes a situation that is far more common, when a prisoner does not become friends with such people, but instead regards them as villains, and despises them more and more with each passing moment, waiting desperately for an opportunity to escape. The expression is “Mount Fraught Syndrome,” and Sunny Baudelaire was experiencing it as she stood at the top of Mount Fraught, gazing down at the frozen waterfall and thinking about her circumstances.

The young girl had spent another sleepless night in the covered casserole dish, after washing the salmon out of it with a few handfuls of melted snow. It was chilly, of course, with the winds of the Mortmain Mountains blowing through the holes in the lid, and it was painful, because once again her teeth were chattering in the cold and giving her tiny cuts on her lips, but there was another reason Sunny did not sleep well, which is that she was frustrated. Despite her best spying attempts, the youngest Baudelaire had been unable to eavesdrop on the villains’ conversation and learn the location of the last safe place where V.F.D. would be gathering, or learn any more about the dreadful recruitment scheme planned by the man with a beard but no hair and the woman with hair but no beard. When the troupe gathered around the flat rock for dinner, they discussed these things, but every time Sunny tried to get close enough to hear what they were saying, they glared at her and quickly changed the subject. It seemed to Sunny that the only thing she had accomplished all evening was preparing a meal that the troupe enjoyed. When she had presented her platter of False Spring Rolls, no one had complained, and every single villainous person had taken second helpings.

But something crucial had escaped the attention of Count Olaf and his comrades during the meal, and for that Sunny was very grateful. As she had told her siblings, the youngest Baudelaire had prepared an assortment of vegetables wrapped in spinach leaves, in honor of False Spring. Her recipe had required the bag of mushrooms, the can of water chestnuts, and the frozen hunk of spinach, which she had thawed by holding it underneath her shirt, as she had when preparing toast tartar. But Sunny had decided at the last minute that she would not use the enormous eggplant. When Violet mentioned that the eggplant must weigh as much as Sunny did, the youngest Baudelaire had an idea, and rather than chopping the eggplant into small strips with her teeth, she hid it behind the flat tire of Count Olaf’s car, and now, as the sun rose and the group of villains began their usual morning bickering, she was retrieving the eggplant and rolling it to the casserole dish. As she rolled it past the automobile, Sunny looked down at the frozen waterfall, which was looking less and less frozen in the morning sun. She knew her siblings were at the bottom with Quigley, and although she couldn’t see them, it made her feel better knowing they were relatively nearby and that, if her plan worked out, she would soon be joining them.

“What are you doing, baby?” Sunny had just slipped the eggplant under the cover of the casserole dish when she heard the voice of one of Olaf’s comrades. The two white-faced women were standing just outside their tent and stretching in the morning sun.

“Aubergine,” Sunny replied, which meant “I’ve concocted a plan involving this eggplant, and it doesn’t matter if I tell you about it because you never understand a single word I say.”

“More babytalk,” said the other white-faced woman with a sigh. “I’m beginning to think that Sunny is only a helpless baby, and not a spy.”

“Goo goo ga—” Sunny began, but the flap of Count Olaf’s tent opened before she could utter the last “ga.” The villain and his girlfriend stood in the morning sun, and it was clear that they expected the new day—Saturday—to be an important one, because they were dressed for the occasion, a phrase which here means “wearing such strange clothing that the youngest Baudelaire was too surprised to say the final ‘ga’ she had been planning.” Amazingly, it appeared that Count Olaf had washed his face, and he was wearing a brand-new suit made out of material that at first seemed to be covered in tiny polka dots. But when Sunny took a closer look, she saw that each dot was a small eye, matching Olaf’s tattoo and the V.F.D. insignia and all of the other eyes that had plagued the Baudelaires since that terrible day on the beach, so that looking at Count Olaf in his new suit felt like looking at a crowd of villains, all staring at Sunny Baudelaire. But no matter how unnerving Olaf’s fashion choice was, Esmé Squalor’s outfit was worse to behold. Sunny could not remember when she had ever seen a dress so enormous, and was surprised that such an article of clothing could have fit in the tent and still leave room for villains to sleep. The dress was made of layers upon layers of shiny cloth, in different shades of yellow, orange, and red, all cut in fierce triangular shapes so that each layer seemed to cut into the next, and rising from the shoulders of the dress were enormous piles of black lace, sticking up into the air in strange curves. For a moment, the dress was so huge and odd that Sunny could not imagine why anyone would wear it, but as the wicked girlfriend stepped farther out of the tent, it became horribly clear. Esmé Squalor was dressed to look like an enormous fire.

“What a wonderful morning!” Count Olaf crowed. “Just think, by the end of the day I’ll have more new members of my troupe than ever before!”

“And we’ll need them,” Esmé agreed. “We’re all going to have to work together for the greater good—burning down the last safe place!”

“Just the idea of the Hotel Denouement in flames makes me so excited, I’m going to open a bottle of wine!” Count Olaf announced, and Sunny covered her mouth with her hands so the villains would not hear her gasp. The Hotel Denouement, she realized, must be the last safe place for volunteers to gather, and Olaf was so excited that he had uttered the name inadvertently, a word which here means “where the youngest Baudelaire could hear it.”

“The idea of all those eagles filling the sky makes me so excited, I’m going to smoke one of those in green cigarettes!” Esmé announced, and then frowned. “Except I don’t have one. Drat.”

“Beg your pardon, your Esméship,” said one of the white-faced women, “but I see some of that green smoke down at the bottom of the waterfall.”

“Really?” Esmé asked eagerly, and looked in the direction Olaf’s employee was pointing. Sunny looked, too, and saw a familiar plume of green smoke at the very bottom of the slope, getting bigger and bigger as the sun continued to rise. The youngest Baudelaire wondered why her siblings were signaling her, and what they were trying to say.

“That’s strange,” Olaf said. “You’d think there’d be nothing left of the headquarters to burn.”

“Look how much smoke there is,” Esmé said greedily. “There must be a whole pack of cigarettes down there. This day is getting even better!”

Count Olaf smiled, and then looked away from the waterfall and noticed Sunny for the first time. “I’ll have the baby go down and get them for you,” Count Olaf said.

“Yessir!” Sunny said eagerly.

“The baby would probably steal all the cigarettes for herself,” Esmé said, glaring at the young girl. “I’ll go.”

“But climbing down there will take hours,” Olaf said. “Don’t you want to be here for the recruitment scheme? I just love springing traps on people.”

“Me, too,” Esmé agreed, “but don’t worry, Olaf. I’ll be back in moments. I’m not going to climb. I’ll take one of the toboggans and sled down the waterfall before anyone else even notices I’m gone.”

“Drat!” Sunny couldn’t help saying. She meant something along the lines of, “That is exactly what I was planning on doing,” but once again no one understood.

“Shut up, toothy,” Esmé said, “and get out of my way.” She flounced past the youngest Baudelaire, and Sunny realized that there was something sewn to the bottom of the dress that made it make a crackling noise as she walked, so that the wicked girlfriend sounded as much like a fire as she looked like one. Blowing a kiss to Count Olaf, she grabbed the toboggan belonging to sinister villains.

“I’ll be right back, darling,” Esmé said. “Tell that baby to take a nap so she won’t see what we’re up to.”

“Esmé’s right,” Olaf said, giving Sunny a cruel smile. “Get in the casserole dish. You’re such an ugly, helpless creature, I can scarcely stand to look at you.”

“You said it, handsome,” Esmé said, and chuckled meanly as she sat at the top of the waterfall. The two white-faced women scurried to help, and gave the toboggan a big push as Sunny did as she was told, and disappeared from Olaf’s sight.

As you may imagine, the sight of a grown woman in an enormous flame-imitating dress tobogganing down from the source of the Stricken Stream to the two tributaries and the half-frozen pool at the bottom of the waterfall is not the sort of thing to pass unnoticed, even from far away. Violet was the first to see the colorful blur heading quickly down the slope, and she lowered Colette’s hand mirror, which she had used once again to catch the rays of the rising sun and reflect them onto the Verdant Flammable Devices, which she had put in a pile in front of the pit. Wrinkling her nose from the bitter smell of the smoke, she turned to Klaus and Quigley, who were putting one last piece of weakened wood across the pit, so their trap would be hidden from view.

“Look,” Violet said, and pointed to the descending shape.

“Do you think it’s Esmé?” Klaus asked.

Violet squinted up at the tobogganing figure. “I think so,” she said. “Nobody but Esmé Squalor would wear an outfit like that.”

“We’d better hide behind the archway,” Quigley said, “before she spots us.”

The two Baudelaires nodded in agreement, and walked carefully to the library entrance, making sure to step around the hole they had dug.

“I’m happy that we can’t see the pit anymore,” Klaus said. “Looking into that blackness reminded me of that terrible passageway at 667 Dark Avenue.”

“First Esmé trapped your siblings there,” Violet said to Quigley, “and then she trapped us.”

“And now we’re fighting fire with fire, and trapping her,” Quigley said uncomfortably.

“It’s best not to think about it,” Violet said, although she had not stopped thinking about the trap since the first handful of ashes and earth. “Soon we’ll have Sunny back, and that’s what’s important.”

“Maybe this is important, too,” Klaus said, and pointed up at the archway. “I never noticed it until now.”

Violet and Quigley looked up to see what he was referring to, and saw four tiny words etched over their heads, right underneath the large letters spelling “V.F.D. Library.”

“‘The world is quiet here,’” Quigley read. “What do you think it means?”

"It looks like a motto," Klaus said. "At Prufrock Preparatory School, they had a motto carved near the entrance, so everyone would remember it when they entered the academy."

Violet shook her head. "That's not what I'm thinking of," she said. "I'm remembering something about that phrase, but just barely."

"The world certainly feels quiet around here," Klaus said. "We haven't heard a single snow gnat since we arrived."

"The smell of smoke scares them away, remember?" Quigley asked.

"Of course," Klaus said, and peered around the archway to check on Esmé's progress. The colorful blur was about halfway down the waterfall, heading straight for the trap they had built. "There's been so much smoke here at headquarters, the gnats might never come back."

"Without snow gnats," Quigley said, "the salmon of the Stricken Stream will go hungry. They feed on snow gnats." He reached into his pocket and opened his commonplace book. "And without salmon," he said, "the Mortmain Mountain eagles will go hungry. The destruction of V.F.D. headquarters has caused even more damage than I thought."

Klaus nodded in agreement. "When we were walking along the Stricken Stream," he said, "the fish were coughing from all the ashes in the water. Remember, Violet?"

He turned to his sister, but Violet was only half listening. She was still gazing at the words on the archway, and trying to remember where she heard them before. "I can just hear those words," she said. *"The world is quiet here."* She closed her eyes. "I think it was a very long time ago, before you were born, Klaus."

"Maybe someone said them to you," Quigley said.

Violet tried to remember as far back as she could, but everything seemed as misty as it did in the mountains. She could see the face of her mother, and her father standing behind her, wearing a suit as black as the ashes of V.F.D. headquarters. Their mouths were open, but Violet could not remember what they were saying. No matter how hard she tried, the memory was as silent as the grave. “Nobody said them to me,” she said finally. “Someone *sang* them. I think my parents sang the words ‘the world is quiet here’ a long time ago, but I don’t know why.” She opened her eyes and faced her brother and her friend. “I think we might be doing the wrong thing,” she said.

“But we agreed,” Quigley said, “to fight fire with fire.”

Violet nodded, and stuck her hands in her pocket, bumping up against the bread knife again. She thought of the darkness of the pit, and the scream Esmé would make as she fell into it. “I know we agreed,” Violet said, “but if V.F.D. really stands for Volunteer Fire Department, then they’re an organization that stops fire. If everyone fought fire with fire, the entire world would go up in smoke.”

“I see what you mean,” Quigley said. “If the V.F.D. motto is ‘The world is quiet here,’ we ought to be doing something less noisy and violent than trapping someone, no matter how wicked they are.”

“When I was looking into the pit,” Klaus said quietly, “I was remembering something I read in a book by a famous philosopher. He said, ‘Whoever fights monsters should see to it that in the process he does not become a monster. And when you look long into an abyss, the abyss also looks into you.’” Klaus looked at his sister, and then at the sight of Esmé approaching, and then at the weakened wood that the three children had placed on the ground. “‘Abyss’ is a fancy word for ‘pit,’” he said. “We built an abyss for Esmé to fall into. That’s something a monster might do.”

Quigley was copying Klaus’s words into his commonplace book. “What happened to that philosopher?” he asked.

“He’s dead,” Klaus replied. “I think you’re right, Violet. We don’t want to be as villainous and monstrous as Count Olaf.”

“But what are we going to do?” Quigley asked. “Sunny is still Olaf’s prisoner, and Esmé will be here at any moment. If we don’t think of the right thing right now, it’ll be too late.”

As soon as the triplet finished his sentence, however, the three children heard something that made them realize it might already be too late. From behind the archway, Violet, Klaus, and Quigley heard a rough, scraping sound as the toboggan reached the bottom of the waterfall and slid to a halt, and then a triumphant giggle from the mouth of Esmé Squalor. The three volunteers peeked around the archway and saw the treacherous girlfriend step off the toboggan with a greedy smile on her face. But when Esmé adjusted her enormous flame-imitating dress and took a step toward the smoking Verdant Flammable Devices, Violet was not looking at her any more. Violet was looking down at the ground, just a few steps from where she was standing. Three dark, round masks were sitting in a pile, where Violet, Klaus, and Quigley had left them upon arriving at the ruins of headquarters. They had assumed that they would not need them again, but the eldest Baudelaire realized they had been wrong. As Esmé took another step closer to the trap, Violet dashed over to the masks, put one on and stepped out of her hiding place as her brother and her friend looked on.

“Stop, Esmé!” she cried. “It’s a trap!”

Esmé stopped in her tracks and gave Violet a curious look. “Who are you?” she asked. “You shouldn’t sneak up on people like that. It’s a villainous thing to do.”

“I’m a volunteer,” Violet said.

Esmé’s mouth, heavy with orange lipstick that matched her dress, curled into a sneer. “There are no volunteers here,” she said. “The entire headquarters are destroyed!”

Klaus was the next to grab a mask and confront Olaf’s treacherous romantic companion. “Our headquarters might be destroyed,” he said, “but the V.F.D. is as strong as ever!”

Esmé frowned at the two siblings as if she couldn’t decide whether to be frightened or not. “You may be strong,” she said nervously, “but you’re also very short." Her dress crackled as she started to take another step toward the pit. "When I get my hands on you—"

"No!" Quigley cried, and stepped out from the arch wearing his mask, taking care not to fall into his own trap. "Don't come any closer, Esmé. If you take another step, you'll fall into our trap."

"You're making that up," Esmé said, but she did not move any closer. "You're trying to keep all the cigarettes for yourself."

"They're not cigarettes," Klaus said, "and we're not liars. Underneath the wood you're about to step on is a very deep pit."

Esmé looked at them suspiciously. Gingerly—a word which here means "without falling into a very deep hole"—she leaned down and moved a piece of wood aside, and stared down into the trap the children had built. "Well, well, well," she said. "You *did* build a trap. I never would have fallen for it, of course, but I must admit you dug quite a pit."

"We wanted to trap you," Violet said, "so we could trade you for the safe return of Sunny Baudelaire. But—"

"But you didn't have the courage to go through with it," Esmé said with a mocking smile. "You volunteers are never brave enough to do something for the greater good."

"Throwing people into pits isn't the greater good!" Quigley cried. "It's villainous treachery!"

"If you weren't such an idiot," Esmé said, "you'd realize that those things are more or less the same."

"He is not an idiot," Violet said fiercely. She knew, of course, that it was not worthwhile to get upset over insults from such a ridiculous person, but she liked Quigley too much to hear him called names. "He led us here to the headquarters using a map he drew himself."

"He's very well-read," Klaus said.

At Klaus's words, Esmé threw back her head and laughed, shaking the crackling layers of her enormous dress. *"Well-read!"* she repeated in a particularly nasty tone of voice. "Being well-read won't help you in this world. Many years ago, I was supposed to waste my entire summer reading *Anna Karenina*, but I knew that silly book would never help me, so I threw it into the fireplace." She reached down and picked up a few more pieces of wood, which she tossed aside with a snicker. "Look at your precious headquarters, volunteers! It's as ruined as my book. And look at *me*! I'm beautiful, fashionable, and I smoke cigarettes!" She laughed again, and pointed at the children with a scornful finger. "If you didn't spend all your time with your heads stuck in books, you'd have that precious baby back."

"We're going to get her back," Violet said firmly.

"Really?" Esmé said mockingly. "And how do you propose to do that?"

"I'm going to talk to Count Olaf," Violet said, "and he's going to give her back to me."

Esmé threw back her head and started to laugh, but not with as much enthusiasm as before. "What do you mean?" she said.

"Just what I said," Violet said.

"Hmmm," Esmé said suspiciously. "Let me think for a moment." The evil girlfriend began to pace back and forth on the frozen pond, her enormous dress crackling with every step.

Klaus leaned in to whisper to his sister. "What are you doing?" he asked. "Do you honestly think that we can get Sunny back from Count Olaf with a simple conversation?"

"I don't know," Violet whispered back, "but it's better than luring someone into a trap."

"It was wrong to dig that pit," Quigley agreed, "but I'm not sure that walking straight into Olaf's clutches is the right thing to do, either."

“It’ll take a while to reach Mount Fraught again,” Violet said. “We’ll think of something during the climb.”

“I hope so,” Klaus said, “but if we can’t think of something—”

Klaus did not get a chance to say what might happen if they couldn’t think of something, because Esmé clapped her hands together to get the children’s attention.

“If you really want to talk to my boyfriend,” she said, “I suppose I can take you to where he is. If you weren’t so stupid, you’d know that he’s very nearby.”

“We know where he is, Esmé,” Klaus said. “He’s at the top of the waterfall, at the source of the Stricken Stream.”

“Then I suppose you know how we can get there,” Esmé said, and looked a little foolish. “The toboggan doesn’t go uphill, so I actually have no idea how we can reach the peak.”

“She will invent a way,” Quigley said, pointing at Violet.

Violet smiled at her friend, grateful for his support, and closed her eyes underneath her mask. Once more, she was thinking of something she had heard sung to her, when she was a very little girl. She had already thought of the way that the three children could take Esmé with them when they ascended the hill, but thinking of their journey made her think of a song she had not thought of for many years. Perhaps when you were very young, someone sang this song to you, perhaps to lull you to sleep, or to entertain you on a long car trip, or in order to teach you a secret code. The song is called “The Itsy Bitsy Spider,” and it is one of the saddest songs ever composed. It tells the story of a small spider who is trying to climb up a water spout, but every time its climb is half over, there is a great burst of water, either due to rain or somebody turning the spout on, and at the end of the song, the spider has decided to try one more time, and will likely be washed away once again.

Violet Baudelaire could not help feeling like this poor spider as she ascended the waterfall for the last time, with Quigley and Klaus beside her and Esmé Squalor on her toboggan behind them. After attaching the last two forks to Klaus's shoes, she had told her companions to tie the leather straps of the toboggan around their waists, so they could drag the villainous girlfriend behind them as they climbed. It was exhausting to approach the peak of Mount Fraught in this manner, particularly after staying up all night digging a pit, and it seemed like they might get washed back down by the dripping water of the Stricken Stream, like the spider Violet had heard about when she was a little girl. The ice on the slope was weakening, after two fork-assisted climbs, a toboggan ride, and the increasing temperatures of False Spring, and with each step of Violet's invention, the ice would shift slightly. It was clear that the slippery slope was almost as exhausted as they were, and soon the ice would vanish completely.

"Mush!" Esmé called from the toboggan. She was using an expression that arctic explorers shouted to their sled dogs, and it certainly did not make the journey any easier.

"I wish she'd stop saying that," Violet murmured from behind her mask. She tapped the candelabra on the ice ahead of her, and a small piece detached from the waterfall and fell to the ruins of headquarters. She watched it disappear below her and sighed. She would never see the V.F.D. headquarters in all its glory. None of the Baudelaires would. Violet would never know how it felt to cook in the kitchen and gaze at the two tributaries of the Stricken Stream, while chatting with the other volunteers. Klaus would never know how it felt to relax in the library and learn all of the secrets of V.F.D. in the comfort of one of the library's chairs, with his feet up on one of the matching V.F.D. footstools. Sunny would never operate the projector in the movie room, or practice the art of the fake mustache in the disguise center, or sit in the parlor at tea time and eat the almond cookies made from my grandmother's recipe. Violet would never study chemical composition in one of the six laboratories, and Klaus would never use the balance beams at the gymnasium, and Sunny would never stand behind the counter at the ice cream shop and prepare butterscotch sundaes for the swimming coaches when it was her turn. And none of the Baudelaires would ever meet some of the organization's most beloved volunteers, including the mechanical instructor C. M. Kornbluth, and Dr. Isaac Anwhistle, whom everyone called Ike, and the brave volunteer who tossed the sugar bowl out the kitchen window so it would not be destroyed in the blaze, and watched it float away on one of the tributaries of the Stricken Stream. The Baudelaires would never do any of these things, any more than I will ever see my beloved Beatrice again, or retrieve my pickle from the refrigerator in which I left it, and return it to its rightful place in an important coded sandwich. Violet, of course, was not aware of everything she would never do, but as she gazed down at the vast, ashen remains of the headquarters, she felt as if her whole journey in the Mortmain Mountains had been as useless as the journey of a tiny arachnid in a song she had never liked to hear.

"Mush!" Esmé cried again, with a cruel chuckle.

"Please stop saying that, Esmé," Violet called down impatiently. "That *mush* nonsense is slowing our climb."

"A slow climb might be to our advantage," Klaus murmured to his sister. "The longer it takes us to reach the summit, the longer we have to think up what we're going to say to Count Olaf."

"We could tell him that he's surrounded," Quigley said, "and that there are volunteers everywhere ready to arrest him if he doesn't let Sunny go free."

Violet shook her mask. "He won't believe that," she said, sticking a fork-assisted shoe into the waterfall. "He can see everything and everyone from Mount Fraught. He'll know we're the only volunteers in the area."

"There must be something we can do," Klaus said. "We didn't make this journey into the mountains for nothing."

"Of course not," Quigley said. "We found each other, and we solved some of the mysteries that were haunting us."

"Will that be enough," Violet asked, "to defeat all those villains on the peak?"

Violet's question was a difficult one, and neither Klaus nor Quigley had the answer, and so rather than hazard a guess—a phrase which here means "continue to expend their energy by discussing the matter"—they decided to hazard their climb, a phrase which here means "continue their difficult journey in silence, until they arrived at last at the source of the Stricken Stream." Hoisting themselves up onto the flat peak, they sat on the edge and pulled the leather straps as hard as they could. It was such a difficult task to drag Esmé Squalor and the toboggan over the edge of the slope and onto Mount Fraught that the children did not notice who was nearby until they heard a familiar scratchy voice right behind them.

"Who goes there?" Count Olaf demanded. Breathless from the climb, the three children turned around to see the villain standing with his two sinister cohorts near his long, black automobile, glaring suspiciously at the masked volunteers.

"We thought you'd get here by taking the path," said the man with a beard but no hair, "not by climbing up the waterfall."

"No, no, no," Esmé said quickly. "These aren't the people we're expecting. These are some volunteers I found at headquarters."

"Volunteers?" said the woman with hair but no beard, but her voice did not sound as deep as it usually did. The villains gave the children the same confused frown they had seen from Esmé, as if they were unsure whether to be scared or scornful, and the hook-handed man, the two white-faced women, and the three former carnival employees gathered around to see what had made their villainous boss fall silent. Although they were exhausted, the two Baudelaires hurriedly untied the straps of the toboggan from their waists and stood with Quigley to face their enemies. The orphans were very scared, of course, but they found that with their faces concealed they could speak their minds, a phrase which here means "confront Count Olaf and his companions as if they weren't one bit frightened."

"We built a trap to capture your girlfriend, Olaf," Violet said, "but we didn't want to become a monster like you."

“They’re idiotic *liars*!” Esmé cried. “I found them hogging the cigarettes, so I captured them myself and made them drag me up the waterfall like sled dogs.”

The middle Baudelaire ignored the wicked girlfriend’s nonsense. “We’re here for Sunny Baudelaire,” Klaus said, “and we’re not leaving without her.”

Count Olaf frowned, and peered at them with his shiny, shiny eyes as if he were trying to see through their masks. “And what makes you so certain,” he said, “that I’ll give you my prisoner just because you say so?”

Violet thought furiously, looking around at her surroundings for anything that might give her an idea of what to do. Count Olaf clearly believed that the three masked people in front of him were members of V.F.D., and she felt that if she could just find the right words to say, she could defeat him without becoming as villainous as her enemies. But she could not find the words, and neither could her brother nor her friend, who stood beside her in silence. The winds of the Mortmain Mountains blew against them, and Violet stuck her hands in her pockets, bumping one finger against the long bread knife. She began to think that perhaps trapping Esmé had been the right thing to do after all. Count Olaf’s frown began to fade, and his mouth started to curl upward in a triumphant smile, but just as he opened his mouth to speak, Violet saw two things that gave her hope once more. The first was the sight of two notebooks, one a deep shade of purple and the other dark blue, sticking out of the pockets of her companions—commonplace books, where Klaus and Quigley had written down all of the information they had found in the ruined library of V.F.D. headquarters. And the other was a collection of dishes spread out on the flat rock that Olaf’s troupe had been using for a table. Sunny had been forced to wash these dishes, using handfuls of melted snow, and she had laid them out to dry in the sunshine of False Spring. Violet could see a stack of plates, each emblazoned with the familiar image of an eye, as well as a row of teacups and a small pitcher for cream. But there was something missing from the tea set, and it made Violet smile behind her mask as she turned to face Count Olaf again.

“You will give us Sunny,” she said, “because we know where the sugar bowl is.”

CHAPTER
Thirteen

Count Olaf gasped, and raised his one eyebrow very high as he gazed at the two Baudelaires and their companion, his eyes shinier than they had ever seen them. *"Where is it?"* he said, in a terrible, wheezing whisper. *"Give it to me!"*

Violet shook her head, grateful that her face was still hidden behind a mask. "Not until you give us Sunny Baudelaire," she said.

"Never!" the villain replied. "Without that big-toothed brat, I'll never capture the Baudelaire fortune. You give me the sugar bowl this instant, or I'll throw all of you off this mountain!"

"If you throw us off the mountain," Klaus said, "you'll never know where the sugar bowl is." He did not add, of course, that the Baudelaires had no idea where the sugar bowl was, or why in the world it was so important.

Esmé Squalor took a sinister step toward her boyfriend, her flame-imitating dress crackling against the cold ground. "We must have that sugar bowl," she snarled. "Let the baby go. We'll cook up another scheme to steal the fortune."

"But stealing the fortune is the greater good," Count Olaf said. "We can't let the baby go."

"Getting the sugar bowl is the greater good," Esmé said, with a frown.

"Stealing the fortune," Olaf insisted.

"Getting the sugar bowl," Esmé replied.

"Fortune!"

"Sugar bowl!"

"Fortune!"

"Sugar bowl!"

"That's enough!" ordered the man with a beard but no hair. "Our recruitment scheme is about to be put into action. We can't have you arguing all day long."

"We wouldn't have argued all day long," Count Olaf said timidly. "After a few hours—"

"We said *that's enough*!" ordered the woman with hair but no beard. "Bring the baby over here!"

"Bring the baby at once!" Count Olaf ordered the two white-faced women. "She's napping in her casserole dish."

The two white-faced women sighed, but hurried over to the casserole dish and lifted it together, as if they were cooks removing something from the oven instead of villainous employees bringing over a prisoner, while the two sinister visitors reached down the necks of their shirts and retrieved something that was hanging around their necks. Violet and Klaus were surprised to see two shiny silver whistles, like the one Count Olaf had used as part of his disguise at Prufrock Preparatory School, when he was pretending to be a coach.

“Watch this, volunteers,” said the sinister man in his hoarse voice, and the two mysterious villains blew their whistles. Instantly, the children heard an enormous rustling sound over their heads, as if the Mortmain Mountain winds were as frightened as the youngsters, and it suddenly grew very dim, as if the morning sun had also put on a mask. But when they looked up, Violet, Klaus, and Quigley saw that the reason for the noisy sky and the fading light was perhaps more strange than frightened winds and a masked sun.

The sky above Mount Fraught was swarming with eagles. There were hundreds and hundreds of them, flying in silent circles high above the two sinister villains. They must have been nesting nearby to have arrived so quickly, and they must have been very thoroughly trained to be so eerily silent. Some of them looked very old, old enough to have been in the skies when the Baudelaire parents were children themselves. Some of them looked quite young, as if they had only recently emerged from the egg and were already obeying the shrill sound of a whistle. But all of them looked exhausted, as if they would rather be anywhere else but the summit of the Mortmain Mountains, doing absolutely anything rather than following the orders of such wretched people.

“Look at these creatures!” cried the woman with hair but no beard. “When the schism occurred, you may have won the carrier crows, volunteers, and you may have won the trained reptiles.”

“Not anymore,” Count Olaf said. “All of the reptiles except one—”

“Don’t interrupt,” the sinister woman interrupted. “You may have the carrier crows, but we have the two most powerful mammals in the world to do our bidding—the lions and eagles!”

“Eagles aren’t *mammals*,” Klaus cried out in frustration. “They’re *birds*!”

“They’re *slaves*,” said the man with a beard but no hair, and the two villains reached into the pockets of their suits and drew out two long, wicked-looking whips. Violet and Klaus could see at once that they were similar to the whip Olaf had used when bossing around the lions at Caligari Carnival. With matching, sinister sneers, the two mysterious villains cracked their whips in the air, and four eagles swooped down from the sky, landing on the strange thick pads that the villains had on their shoulders.

“These beasts will do anything we tell them to do,” the woman said. “And today they’re going to help us with our greatest triumph.” She uncurled the whip and gestured to the ground around her, and the children noticed for the first time an enormous net on the ground, spread out over almost the entire peak and just stopping at their fork-assisted climbing shoes. “On my signal, these eagles will lift this net from the ground and carry it into the sky, capturing a group of young people who think they’re here to celebrate False Spring.”

“The Snow Scouts,” Violet said in astonishment.

“We’ll capture every one of those uniformed brats,” the villainous man bragged, “and each one of them will be offered the exciting opportunity to join us.”

“They’ll never join you,” Klaus said.

“Of course they will,” said the sinister woman, in her deep, deep voice. “They’ll either be recruited, or they’ll be our prisoners. But one thing is for certain—we’ll burn down every single one of their parents’ homes.”

The two Baudelaires shuddered, and even Count Olaf looked a bit uneasy. “Of course,” he said quickly, “the main reason we’re doing all this is to get our hands on all those fortunes.”

“Of course,” Esmé said with a nervous snicker. “We’ll have the Spats fortune, the Kornbluth fortune, the Winnipeg fortune, and many others. I’ll be able to afford the penthouse apartment of every single building that isn’t on fire!”

“Once you tell us where the sugar bowl is,” said the man with a beard but no hair, “you can leave, volunteers, and take your baby friend with you. But wouldn’t you rather join us?”

“No, thank you,” Quigley said. “We’re not interested.”

“It doesn’t matter if you’re interested or not,” said the woman with hair but no beard. “Look around you. You’re hopelessly outnumbered. Wherever we go, we find new comrades who are eager to assist us in our work.”

“We have comrades, too,” Violet said bravely. “As soon as we rescue Sunny, we’re going to meet up with the other volunteers at the last safe place, and tell them about your terrible scheme!”

“It’s too late for that, volunteers,” said Count Olaf in triumph. “Here come my new recruits!”

With a horrible laugh, the villain pointed in the direction of the rocky path, and the elder Baudelaires could see, past the covered casserole dish still held by the white-faced women, the arrival of the uniformed Snow Scouts, walking in two neat lines, more like eggs in a carton than young people on a hike. Apparently, the scouts had realized that the snow gnats were absent from this part of the Mortmain Mountains and had removed their masks, so Violet and Klaus could instantly spot Carmelita Spats, standing at the front of one of the lines with a tiara on her head—“tiara” is a word which here means “small crown given to a nasty little girl for no good reason”—and a large smirk on her face. Beside her, at the head of the other line, stood Bruce, holding the Springpole in one hand and a big cigar in the other. There was something about his face that Violet and Klaus found familiar, but they were too concerned about the villainous recruitment plan to give it much thought.

“What are all you cakesniffers doing here?” demanded Carmelita, in an obnoxious voice the two siblings found equally familiar. “I’m the False Spring Queen, and I order you to go away!”

“Now, now, Carmelita,” Bruce said. “I’m sure these people are here to help celebrate your special day. Let’s try to be accommodating. In fact, we should try to be accommodating, basic, calm, darling—"

The scouts had begun to say the ridiculous pledge along with Bruce, but the two Baudelaires knew they could not wait for the entire alphabetical list to be recited. "Bruce," Violet interrupted quickly, "these people are not here to help you celebrate False Spring. They're here to kidnap all of the Snow Scouts."

"What?" Bruce asked with a smile, as if the eldest Baudelaire might have been joking.

"It's a trap," Klaus said. "Please, turn around and lead the scouts away from here."

"Pay no attention to these three masked idiots," Count Olaf said quickly. "The mountain air has gone to their heads. Just take a few steps closer and we'll all join in a special celebration."

"We're happy to accommodate," Bruce said. "After all, we're accommodating, basic—"

"No!" Violet cried. "Don't you see the net on the ground? Don't you see the eagles in the sky?"

"The net is decoration," Esmé said, with a smile as false as the Spring, "and the eagles are wildlife."

"Please listen to us!" Klaus said. "You're in terrible danger!"

Carmelita glared at the two Baudelaires, and adjusted her tiara. "Why should I listen to cakesniffing strangers like you?" she asked. "You're so stupid that you've still got your masks on, even though there aren't any snow gnats around here."

Violet and Klaus looked at one another through their masks. Carmelita's response had been quite rude, but the two siblings had to admit she had a point. The Baudelaires were unlikely to convince anyone that they were telling the truth while their faces were unnecessarily covered. They did not want to sacrifice their disguises and reveal their true identities to Count Olaf and his troupe, but they couldn't risk the kidnapping of all the Snow Scouts, even to save their sister. The two Baudelaires nodded at one another, and then turned to see that Quigley was nodding, too, and the three children reached up and took off their masks for the greater good.

Count Olaf's mouth dropped open in surprise. "You're dead!" he said to the eldest Baudelaire, saying something that he knew full well was ridiculous. "You perished in the caravan, along with Klaus!"

Esmé stared at Klaus, looking just as astonished as her boyfriend. "You're dead, too!" she cried. "You fell off a mountain!"

"And you're one of those twins!" Olaf said to Quigley. "You died a long time ago!"

"I'm not a twin," Quigley said, "and I'm not dead."

"And," Count Olaf said with a sneer, "you're not a volunteer. None of you are members of V.F.D. You're just a bunch of orphan brats."

"In that case," said the woman with hair but no beard, in her deep, deep voice, "there's no reason to worry about that stupid baby any longer."

"That's true," Olaf said, and turned to the white-faced women. "Throw the baby off the mountain!" he ordered.

Violet and Klaus cried out in horror, but the two white-faced women merely looked at the covered casserole dish they were holding, and then at one another. Then, slowly, they looked at Count Olaf, but neither of them moved an inch.

"Didn't you hear me?" Olaf asked. "Throw that baby off this mountain!"

"No," said one of the white-faced women, and the two Baudelaires turned to them in relief.

"No?" asked Esmé Squalor in an astonished voice. "What do you mean, *no*?"

"We mean no," said the white-faced woman, and her companion nodded. Together they put the covered casserole dish down on the ground in front of them. Violet and Klaus were surprised to see that the dish did not move, and assumed that their sister must have been too scared to come out.

"We don't want to participate in your schemes anymore," said the other white-faced woman, and sighed. "For a while, it was fun to fight fire with fire, but we've seen enough flames and smoke to last our whole lives."

"We don't think that it was a coincidence that our home burned to the ground," said the first woman. "We lost a sibling in that fire, Olaf."

Count Olaf pointed at the two women with a long, bony finger. "Obey my orders this *instant*!" he screamed, but his two former accomplices merely shook their heads, turned away from the villain, and began to walk away. Everyone on the square peak watched in silence as the two white-faced women walked past Count Olaf, past Esmé Squalor, past the two sinister villains with eagles on their shoulders, past the two Baudelaires and Quigley Quagmire, past the hook-handed man and the former employees of the carnival, and finally past Bruce and Carmelita Spats and the rest of the Snow Scouts, until they reached the rocky path and began to walk away from Mount Fraught altogether.

Count Olaf opened his mouth and let out a terrible roar, and jumped up and down on the net. "You can't walk away from me, you pasty-faced women!" he cried. "I'll find you and destroy you myself! In fact, I can do anything myself! I'm an individual practitioner, and I don't need anybody's help to throw this baby off the mountain!" With a nasty chuckle, he picked up the covered casserole dish, staggering slightly, and walked to the edge of the half-frozen waterfall.

"No!" Violet cried.

"Sunny!" Klaus screamed.

“Say good-bye to your baby sister, Baudelaires!” Count Olaf said, with a triumphant smile that showed all of his filthy teeth.

“I’m not a baby!” cried a familiar voice from under the villain’s long, black automobile, and the two elder Baudelaires watched with pride and relief as Sunny emerged from behind the tire Violet had punctured, and ran to hug her siblings. Klaus had to take his glasses off to wipe the tears from his eyes as he was finally reunited with the young girl who was his sister. “I’m not a baby!” Sunny said again, turning to Olaf in triumph.

“How could this be?” Count Olaf said, but when he removed the cover from the casserole dish, he saw how this could be, because the object inside, which was about the same size and weight as the youngest Baudelaire, wasn’t a baby either.

“Babganoush!” Sunny cried, which meant something along the lines of, “I concocted an escape plan with the eggplant that turned out to be even handier than I thought,” but there was no need for anyone to translate, as the large vegetable slid out of the casserole dish and landed with a *plop!* at Olaf’s feet.

“Nothing is going right for me today!” cried the villain. “I’m beginning to think that washing my face was a complete waste of time!”

“Don’t upset yourself, boss,” said Colette, contorting herself in concern. “I’m sure that Sunny will cook us something delicious with the eggplant.”

“That’s true,” the hook-handed man said. “She’s becoming quite a cook. The False Spring Rolls were quite tasty, and the lox was delicious.”

“It could have used a little dill, in my opinion,” Hugo said, but the three reunited Baudelaires turned away from this ridiculous conversation to face the Snow Scouts.

“Now do you believe us?” Violet asked Bruce. “Can’t you see that this man is a terrible villain who is trying to do you harm?”

“Don’t you remember us?” Klaus asked Carmelita Spats. “Count Olaf had a terrible scheme at Prufrock Prep, and he has a terrible scheme now!”

“Of course I remember you,” Carmelita said. “You’re those cakesniffing orphans who caused Vice Principal Nero all that trouble. And now you’re trying to ruin my very special day! Give me that Springpole, Uncle Bruce!”

“Now, now, Carmelita,” Bruce said, but Carmelita had already grabbed the long pole from Bruce’s hands and was marching across the net toward the source of the Stricken Stream. The man with a beard but no hair and the woman with hair but no beard clasped their wicked whips and raised their shiny whistles to their sinister mouths, but the Baudelaires could see they were waiting to spring their trap until the rest of the scouts stepped forward, so they would be inside the net when the eagles lifted it from the ground.

“I crown myself False Spring Queen!” Carmelita announced, when she reached the very edge of Mount Fraught. With a nasty laugh of triumph, she elbowed the Baudelaires aside and drove the Springpole into the half-frozen top of the waterfall. There was a slow, loud shattering sound, and the Baudelaires looked down the slope and saw that an enormous crack was slowly making its way down the center of the waterfall, toward the pool and the two tributaries of the Stricken Stream. The Baudelaires gasped in horror. Although it was only the ice that was cracking, it looked as if the mountain were beginning to split in half, and that soon an enormous schism would divide the entire world.

“What are you looking at?” Carmelita asked scornfully. “Everybody’s supposed to be doing a dance in my honor.”

“That’s right,” Count Olaf said, “why doesn’t everybody step forward and do a dance in honor of this darling little girl?”

“Sounds good to me,” Kevin said, leading his fellow employees onto the net. “After all, I have two equally strong feet.”

“And we should try to be accommodating,” the hook-handed man said. “Isn’t that what you said, Uncle Bruce?”

“Absolutely,” Bruce agreed, with a puff on his cigar. He looked a bit relieved that all the arguing had ceased, and that the scouts finally had an opportunity to do the same thing they did every year. “Come on, Snow Scouts, let’s recite the Snow Scout Alphabet Pledge as we dance around the Springpole.”

The scouts cheered and followed Bruce onto the net. “Snow Scouts,” the Snow Scouts said, “are accommodating, basic, calm, darling, emblematic, frisky, grinning, human, innocent, jumping, kept, limited, meek, nap-loving, official, pretty, quarantined, recent, scheduled, tidy, understandable, victorious, wholesome, xylophone, young, and zippered, every morning, every afternoon, every night, and all day long!”

There is nothing wrong, of course, with having a pledge, and putting into words what you might feel is important in your life as a reminder to yourself as you make your way in the world. If you feel, for instance, that well-read people are less likely to be evil, and a world full of people sitting quietly with good books in their hands is preferable to a world filled with schisms and sirens and other noisy and troublesome things, then every time you enter a library you might say to yourself, “The world is quiet here,” as a sort of pledge proclaiming reading to be the greater good. If you feel that well-read people ought to be lit on fire and their fortunes stolen, you might adopt the saying “Fight fire with fire!” as your pledge, whenever you ordered one of your comrades around. But whatever words you might choose to describe your own life, there are two basic guidelines for composing a good pledge. One guideline is that the pledge make good sense, so that if your pledge contains the word “xylophone,” for example, you mean that a percussion instrument played with mallets is very important to you, and not that you simply couldn’t think of a good word that begins with the letter X. The other guideline is that the pledge be relatively short, so if a group of villains is luring you into a trap with a net and a group of exhausted trained eagles, you’ll have more time to escape.

The Snow Scout Alphabet Pledge, sadly, did not follow either of these guidelines. As the Snow Scouts promised to be “xylophone,” the man with a beard but no hair cracked his whip in the air, and the eagles sitting on both villains’ shoulders began to flap their wings and, digging their claws into the thick pads, lifted the two sinister people high in the air, and when the pledge neared its end, and the Snow Scouts were all taking a big breath to make the snowy sound, the woman with hair but no beard blew her whistle, making a loud shriek the Baudelaires remembered from running laps as part of Olaf's scheme at Prufrock Prep. The three siblings stood with Quigley and watched as the rest of the eagles quickly dove to the ground, picked up the net, and, their wings trembling with the effort, lifted everyone who was standing on it into the air, the way you might remove all the dinner dishes from the table by lifting all the corners of the tablecloth. If you were to try such an unusual method of clearing the table, you would likely be sent to your room or chased out of the restaurant, and the results on Mount Fraught were equally disastrous. In moments, all of the Snow Scouts and Olaf's henchfolk were in an aerial heap, struggling together inside the net that the eagles were holding. The only person who escaped recruitment—besides the Baudelaires and Quigley Quagmire, of course—was Carmelita Spats, standing next to Count Olaf and his girlfriend.

"What's going on?" Bruce asked Count Olaf from inside the net. "What have you done?"

"I've triumphed," Count Olaf said, "*again*. A long time ago, I tricked you out of a reptile collection that I needed for my own use." The Baudelaires looked at one another in astonishment, suddenly realizing when they had met Bruce before. "And now, I've tricked you out of a collection of children!"

"What's going to happen to us?" asked one of the Snow Scouts fearfully.

"I don't care," said another Snow Scout, who seemed to be afflicted with Stockholm Syndrome already. "Every year we hike up to Mount Fraught and do the same thing. At least this year is a little different!"

"Why are you recruiting me, too?" asked the hook-handed man, and the Baudelaires could see one of his hooks frantically sticking out of the net. "I already work for you."

“Don’t worry, hooky,” Esmé replied mockingly. “It’s all for the greater good!”

“Mush!” cried the man with a beard but no hair, cracking his whip in the air. Squawking in fear, the eagles began to drag the net across the sky, away from Mount Fraught.

“You get the sugar bowl from those bratty orphans, Olaf,” ordered the woman with hair but no beard, “and we’ll all meet up at the last safe place!”

“With these eagles at our disposal,” the sinister man said in his hoarse voice, “we can finally catch up to that self-sustaining hot air mobile home and destroy those volunteers!”

The Baudelaires gasped, and shared an astonished look with Quigley. The villain was surely talking about the device that Hector had built at the Village of Fowl Devotees, in which Duncan and Isadora had escaped.

“We’ll fight fire with fire!” the woman with hair but no beard cried in triumph, and the eagles carried her away. Count Olaf muttered something to himself and then turned and began creeping toward the Baudelaires. “I only need one of you to learn where the sugar bowl is,” he said, his eyes shining brightly, “and to get my hands on the fortune. But which one should it be?”

“That’s a difficult decision,” Esmé said. “On one hand, it’s been enjoyable having an infant servant. But it would be a lot of fun to smash Klaus’s glasses and watch him bump into things.”

“But Violet has the longest hair,” Carmelita volunteered, as the Baudelaires backed toward the cracked waterfall with Quigley right behind them. “You could yank on it all the time, and tie it to things when you were bored.”

“Those are both excellent ideas,” Count Olaf said. “I’d forgotten what an adorable little girl you are. Why don’t you join us?”

“Join you?” Carmelita asked.

“Look at my stylish dress,” Esmé said to Carmelita. “If you joined us, I’d buy you all sorts of in outfits.”

Carmelita looked thoughtful, gazing first at the children, and then at the two villains standing next to her and smiling. The three Baudelaires shared a look of horrified disappointment with Quigley. The siblings remembered how monstrous Carmelita had been at school, but it had never occurred to them that she would be interested in joining up with even more monstrous people.

“Don’t believe them, Carmelita,” Quigley said, and took his purple notebook out of his pocket. “They’ll burn your parents’ house down. I have the evidence right here, in my commonplace book.”

“What are you going to believe, Carmelita?” Count Olaf asked. “A silly book, or something an adult tells you?”

“Look at us, you adorable little girl,” Esmé said, her yellow, orange, and red dress crackling on the ground. “Do we look like the sort of people who like to burn down houses?”

“Carmelita!” Violet cried. “Don’t listen to them!”

“Carmelita!” Klaus cried. “Don’t join them!”

“Carmelita!” Sunny cried, which meant something like, “You’re making a monstrous decision!”

“Carmelita,” Count Olaf said, in a sickeningly sweet voice. “Why don’t you choose one orphan to live, and push the others off the cliff, and then we’ll all go to a nice hotel together.”

“You’ll be like the daughter we never had,” Esmé said, stroking her tiara.

“Or something,” added Olaf, who looked like he would prefer having another employee rather than a daughter.

Carmelita glanced once more at the Baudelaires, and then smiled up at the two villains. “Do you really think I’m adorable?” she asked.

“I think you’re adorable, beautiful, cute, dainty, eye-pleasing, flawless, gorgeous, harmonious, impeccable, jaw-droppingly adorable, keen, luscious, magnificent, nifty, obviously adorable, photogenic, quite adorable, ravishing, splendid, thin, undeformed, very adorable, well-proportioned, xylophone, yummy, and zestfully adorable,” Esmé pledged, “every morning, every afternoon, every night, and all day long!”

“Don’t listen to her!” Quigley pleaded. “A person can’t be ‘xylophone’!”

“I don’t care!” Carmelita said. “I’m going to push these cakesniffers off the mountain, and start an exciting and fashionable new life!”

The Baudelaires took another step back, and Quigley followed, giving the children a panicked look. Above them they could hear the squawking of the eagles as they took the villains’ new recruits farther and farther away. Behind them they could feel the four drafts of the valley below, where the headquarters had been destroyed by people the children’s parents had devoted their lives to stopping. Violet reached in her pocket for her ribbon, trying to imagine what she could invent that could get them away from such villainous people, and journeying toward their fellow volunteers at the last safe place. Her fingers brushed against the bread knife, and she wondered if she should remove the weapon from her pocket and use it to threaten the villains with violence, or whether this, too, would make her as villainous as the man who was staring at her now.

“Poor Baudelaires,” Count Olaf said mockingly. “You might as well give up. You’re hopelessly outnumbered.”

“We’re not outnumbered at all,” Klaus said. “There are four of us, and only three of you.”

“I count triple because I’m the False Spring Queen,” Carmelita said, “so you *are* outnumbered, cakesniffers.”

This, of course, was more utter nonsense from the mouth of this cruel girl, but even if it weren’t nonsense, it does not always matter if one is outnumbered or not. When Violet and Klaus were hiking toward the Valley of Four Drafts, for instance, they were outnumbered by the swarm of snow gnats, but they managed to find Quigley Quagmire, climb up the Vertical Flame Diversion to the headquarters, and find the message hidden in the refrigerator. Sunny had been outnumbered by all of the villains on top of Mount Fraught, and had still managed to survive the experience, discover the location of the last safe place, and concoct a few recipes that were as easy as they were delicious. And the members of V.F.D. have always been outnumbered, because the number of greedy and wicked people always seems to be increasing, while more and more libraries go up in smoke, but the volunteers have managed to endure, a word which here means “meet in secret, communicate in code, and gather crucial evidence to foil the schemes of their enemies.” It does not always matter whether there are more people on your side of the schism than there are on the opposite side, and as the Baudelaires stood with Quigley and took one more step back, they knew what was more important.

“Rosebud!” Sunny cried, which meant “In some situations, the location of a certain object can be much more important than being outnumbered,” and it was true. As the villains gasped in astonishment, Violet sat down in the toboggan, grabbing the leather straps. Quigley sat down behind her and put his arms around her waist, and Klaus sat down next, and put his arms around Quigley’s, and there was just enough room in back for a young girl, so Sunny sat behind her brother and hung on tight as Violet pushed off from the peak of Mount Fraught and sent the four children hurtling down the slope. It did not matter that they were outnumbered. It only mattered that they could escape from a monstrous end by racing down the last of the slippery slope, just as it only matters for you to escape from a monstrous end by putting down the last of *The Slippery Slope*, and reading a book in which villains do not roar at children who are trying to escape.

“We’ll be right behind you, Baudelaires!” Count Olaf roared, as the toboggan raced toward the Valley of Four Drafts, bumping and splashing against the cracked and melting ice.

"He won't be right behind us," Violet said. "My shoes punctured his tire, remember?"

Quigley nodded. "And he'll have to take that path," he said. "A car can't go down a waterfall."

"We'll have a head start," Violet said. "Maybe we can reach the last safe place before he does."

"Overhear!" Sunny cried. "Hotel Denouement!"

"Good work, Sunny!" Violet said proudly, pulling on the leather straps to steer the toboggan away from the large crack. "I knew you'd be a good spy."

"Hotel Denouement," Quigley said. "I think I have that in one of my maps. I'll check my commonplace book when we get to the bottom."

"Bruce!" Sunny cried.

"That's another thing to write down in our commonplace books," Klaus agreed. "That man Bruce was at Dr. Montgomery's house at the end of our stay. He said he was packing up Monty's reptile collection for the herpetological society."

"Do you think he's really a member of V.F.D.?" Violet asked.

"We can't be sure," Quigley said. "We've managed to investigate so many mysteries, and yet there's still so much we don't know." He sighed thoughtfully, and gazed down at the ruins of headquarters rushing toward them. "My siblings—"

But the Baudelaires never got to hear any more about Quigley's siblings, because at that moment the toboggan, despite Violet's efforts with the leather straps, slipped against a melted section of the waterfall, and the large sled began to spin. The children screamed, and Violet grabbed the straps as hard as she could, only to have them break in her hands. "The steering mechanism is broken!” she yelled. “Dragging Esmé Squalor up the slope must have weakened the straps!”

“Uh-oh!” Sunny cried, which meant something along the lines of, “That doesn’t sound like good news.”

“At this velocity,” Violet said, using a scientific word for speed, “the toboggan won’t stop when we reach the frozen pool. If we don’t slow down, we’ll fall right into the pit we dug.”

Klaus was getting dizzy from all the spinning, and closed his eyes behind his glasses. “What can we do?” he asked.

“Drag your shoes against the ice!” Violet cried. “The forks should slow us down!”

Quickly, the two elder Baudelaires stretched out their legs and dragged the forks of their shoes against the last of the ice on the slope. Quigley followed suit, but Sunny, who of course was not wearing fork-assisted climbing shoes, could do nothing but listen to the scraping and splashing of the forks against the thawing ice of the stream as the toboggan slowed ever so slightly.

“It’s not enough!” Klaus cried. As the toboggan continued to spin, he caught brief glimpses of the pit they had dug, covered with a thin layer of weakened wood, getting closer and closer as the four children hurtled toward the bottom of the waterfall.

“Bicuspid?” Sunny asked, which meant something like “Should I drag my teeth against the ice, too?”

“It’s worth a try,” Klaus said, but as soon as the youngest Baudelaire leaned down and dragged her teeth along the thawing waterfall, the Baudelaires could see at once that it was not really worth a try at all, as the toboggan kept spinning and racing toward the bottom.

“That’s not enough, either,” Violet said, and focused her inventing mind as hard as she could, remembering how she had stopped the caravan, when she and her brother were hurtling away from Count Olaf's automobile. There was nothing large enough to use as a drag chute, and the eldest Baudelaire found herself wishing that Esmé Squalor were on board with them, so she could stop the toboggan with her enormous, flame-imitating dress. She knew there was no blackstrap molasses, wild clover honey, corn syrup, aged balsamic vinegar, apple butter, strawberry jam, caramel sauce, maple syrup, butterscotch topping, maraschino liqueur, virgin and extra-virgin olive oil, lemon curd, dried apricots, mango chutney, *crema di noci*, tamarind paste, hot mustard, marshmallows, creamed corn, peanut butter, grape preserves, salt water taffy, condensed milk, pumpkin pie filling, or glue on board, or any other sticky substance, for that matter. But then she remembered the small table she had used to drag on the ground, behind the caravan, and she reached into her pocket and knew what she could do.

"Hang on!" Violet cried, but she did not hang on herself. Dropping the broken straps of the toboggan, she grabbed the long bread knife and took it out of her pocket at last. It had only been several days, but it felt like a very long time since she had taken the knife from the caravan, and it seemed that every few minutes she had felt its jagged blade in her pocket as she tried to defeat the villains high above her, without becoming a villain herself. But now, at last, there was something she could do with the knife that might save them all, without hurting anyone. Gritting her teeth, Violet leaned out of the spinning toboggan and thrust the knife as hard as she could into the ice of the slippery slope.

The tip of the blade hit the crack caused by Carmelita's Springpole, and then the entire knife sank into the slope just as the toboggan reached the bottom. There was a sound the likes of which the Baudelaires had never heard, like a combination of an enormous window shattering and the deep, booming sound of someone firing a cannon. The knife had widened the crack, and in one tremendous crash, the last of the ice fell to pieces and all of the forks, sunlight, teeth, and tobogganing finally took their toll on the waterfall. In one enormous *whoosh!*, the waters of the Stricken Stream came rushing down the slope, and in a moment the Baudelaires were no longer on a frozen pool at the bottom of a strange curve of ice, but simply at the bottom of a rushing waterfall, with gallons and gallons of water pouring down on them. The orphans had just enough time to take a deep breath before the toboggan was forced underwater. The three siblings hung on tight, but the eldest Baudelaire felt a pair of hands slip from her waist, and when the wooden toboggan bobbed to the surface again, she called out the name of her lost friend.

"Quigley!" she screamed.

"Violet!" The Baudelaires heard the triplet's voice as the toboggan began to float down one of the tributaries. Klaus pointed, and through the rush of the waterfall the children could see a glimpse of their friend. He had managed to grab onto a piece of wood from the ruins of headquarters, something that looked a bit like a banister, such as one might need to walk up a narrow staircase leading to an astronomical observatory. The rush of the water was dragging the wood, and Quigley, down the opposite tributary of the Stricken Stream.

"Quigley!" Violet screamed again.

"Violet!" Quigley shouted, over the roar of the water. The siblings could see he had removed his commonplace book from his pocket and was desperately waving it at them. *"Wait for me! Wait for me at—"*

But the Baudelaires heard no more. The Stricken Stream, in its sudden thaw from the arrival of False Spring, whisked the banister and the toboggan away from one another, down the two separate tributaries. The siblings had one last glimpse of the notebook's dark purple cover before Quigley rushed around one twist in the stream, and the Baudelaires rushed around another, and the triplet was gone from their sight.

"Quigley!" Violet called, one more time, and tears sprung in her eyes.

"He's alive," Klaus said, and held Violet's shoulder to help her balance on the bobbing toboggan. She could not tell if the middle Baudelaire was crying, too, or if his face was just wet from the waterfall. "He's alive, and that's the important thing."

"Intrepid," Sunny said, which meant something like, "Quigley Quagmire was brave and resourceful enough to survive the fire that destroyed his home, and I’m sure he’ll survive this, too.”

Violet could not bear that her friend was rushing away from her, so soon after first making his acquaintance. “But we’re supposed to wait for him,” she said, “and we don’t know where.”

“Maybe he’s going to try to reach his siblings before the eagles do,” Klaus said, “but we don’t know where they are.”

“Hotel Denouement?” Sunny guessed. “V.F.D.?”

“Klaus,” Violet said, “you saw some of Quigley’s research. Do you know if these two tributaries ever meet up again?”

Klaus shook his head. “I don’t know,” he said. “Quigley’s the cartographer.”

“Godot,” Sunny said, which meant “We don’t know where to go, and we don’t know how to get there.”

“We know some things,” Klaus said. “We know that someone sent a message to J.S.”

“Jacques,” Sunny said.

Klaus nodded. “And we know that the message said to meet on Thursday at the last safe place.”

“Matahari,” Sunny said, and Klaus smiled, and pulled Sunny toward him so she wouldn’t fall off the floating toboggan. She was no longer a baby, but the youngest Baudelaire was still young enough to sit on her brother’s lap.

“Yes,” Klaus agreed. “Thanks to you, we know that the last safe place is the Hotel Denouement.”

“But we don’t know where that is,” Violet said. “We don’t know where to find these volunteers, or if indeed there are any more surviving members of V.F.D. We can’t even be certain what V.F.D. stands for, or if our parents are truly dead. Quigley was right. We've managed to investigate so many mysteries, and yet there's still so much we don't know."

Her siblings nodded sadly, and if I had been there at that moment, instead of arriving far too late to see the Baudelaires, I would have nodded, too. Even for an author like myself, who has dedicated his entire life to investigating the mysteries that surround the Baudelaire case, there is still much I have been unable to discover. I do not know, for instance, what happened to the two white-faced women who decided to quit Olaf's troupe and walk away, all by themselves, down the Mortmain Mountains. There are some who say that they still paint their faces white, and can be seen singing sad songs in some of the gloomiest music halls in the city. There are some who say that they live together in the hinterlands, attempting to grow rhubarb in the dry and barren ground. And there are those who say that they did not survive the trip down from Mount Fraught, and that their bones can be found in one of the many caves in the odd, square peaks. But although I have sat through song after dreary song, and tasted some of the worst rhubarb in my life, and brought bone after bone to a skeleton expert until she told me that I was making her so miserable that I should never return, I have not been able to discover what truly happened to the two women. I do not know where the remains of the caravan are, as I have told you, and as I reach the end of the rhyming dictionary, and read the short list of words that rhyhme with "zucchini," I am beginning to think I should stop my search for the destroyed vehicle and give up that particular part of my research. And I have not tracked down the refrigerator in which the Baudelaires found the Verbal Fridge Dialogue, despite stories that it is also in one of the Mortmain Mountain caves, or performing in some of the gloomiest music halls in the city.

But even though there is much I do not know, there are a few mysteries that I have solved for certain, and one thing I am sure about is where the Baudelaire orphans went next, as the ashen waters of the Stricken Stream hurried their toboggan out of the Mortmain Mountains, just as the sugar bowl was hurried along, after the volunteer tossed it into the stream to save it from the fire. But although I know exactly where the Baudelaires went, and can even trace their path on a map drawn by one of the most promising young cartographers of our time, I am not the writer who can describe it best. The writer who can most accurately and elegantly describe the path of the three orphans was an associate of mine who, like the man who wrote "The Road Less Traveled," is now dead. Before he died, however, he was widely regarded as a very good poet, although some people think his writings about religion were a little too mean-spirited. His name was Algernon Charles Swinburne, and the last quatrain of the eleventh stanza of his poem "The Garden of Proserpine" perfectly describes what the children found as this chapter in their story drew to an end, and the next one began. The first half of the quatrain reads,

That no life lives forever;

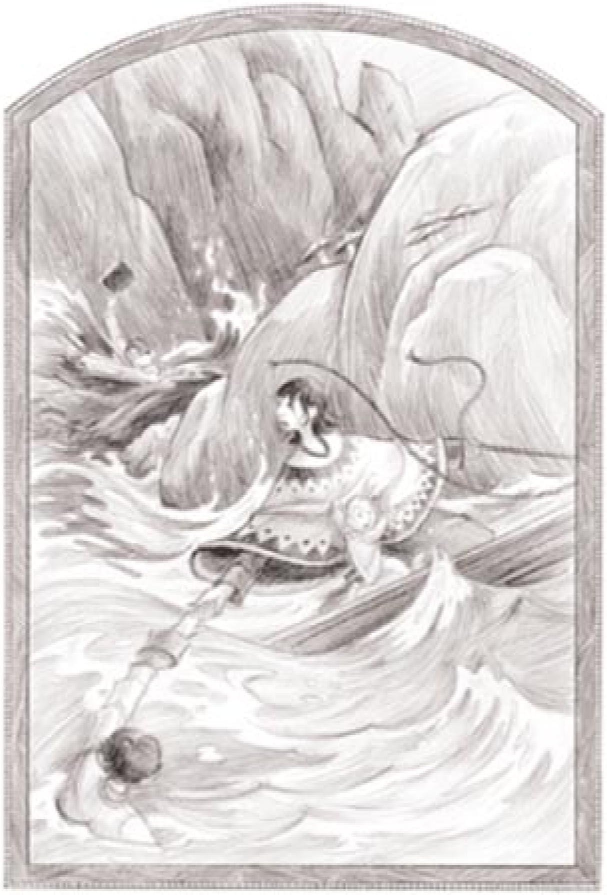
That dead men rise up never;

and indeed, the grown men in the Baudelaires' lives who were dead, such as Jacques Snicket, or the children's father, were never going to rise up. And the second half of the quatrain reads,

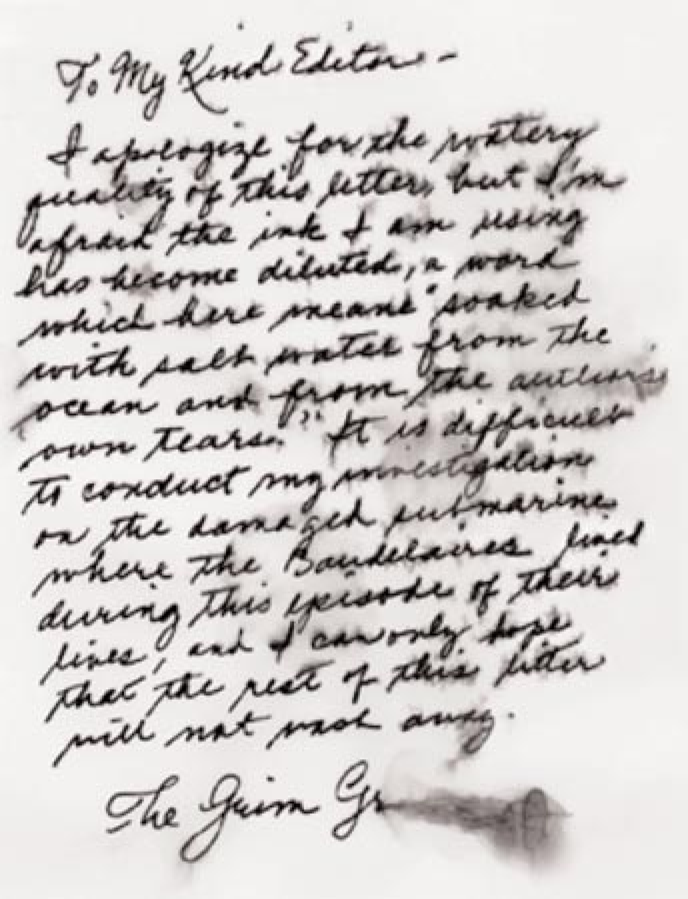
That even the weariest river

Winds somewhere safe to sea.

This part is a bit trickier, because some poems are a bit like secret codes, in that you must study them carefully in order to discover their meaning. A poet such as Quigley Quagmire's sister, Isadora, of course, would know at once what those two lines mean, but it took me quite some time before I decoded them. Eventually, however, it became clear that "the weariest river" refers to the Stricken Stream, which indeed seemed weary from carrying away all of the ashes from the destruction of V.F.D. headquarters, and that "winds somewhere safe to sea" refers to the last safe place where all the volunteers, including Quigley Quagmire, could gather. As Sunny said, she and her siblings did not know where to go, and they didn't know how to get there, but the Baudelaire orphans were winding there anyway, and that is one thing I know for certain.



To My Kind Editor



To My Kind Editor –

I apologize for the watery quality of this letter, but I'm afraid the ink I am using has become diluted, a word which here means "soaked with salt water from the ocean and from the author's own tears." It is difficult to conduct my investigation on the damaged submarine where the Baudelaires lived during this episode of their lives, and I can only hope that the rest of this letter will not wash away.

The Grim Gr

A Series of Unfortunate Events

THE BAD BEGINNING

THE REPTILE ROOM

THE WIDE WINDOW

THE MISERABLE MILL

THE AUSTERE ACADEMY

THE ERSATZ ELEVATOR

THE VILE VILLAGE

THE HOSTILE HOSPITAL

THE CARNIVOROUS CARNIVAL

THE SLIPPERY SLOPE

THE GRIM GROTTO

THE PENULTIMATE PERIL

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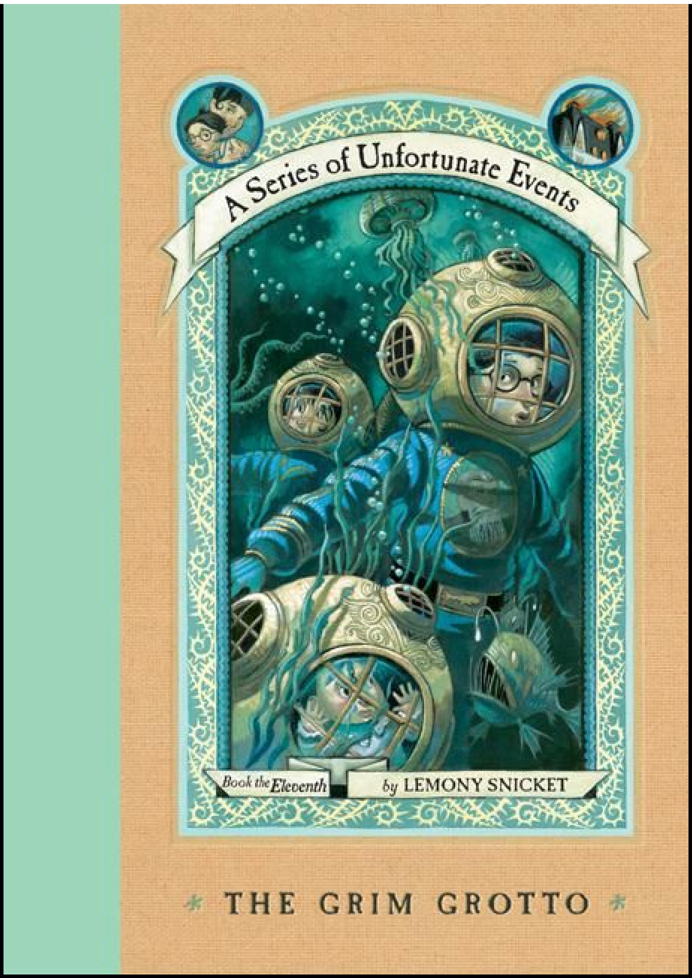
A Series of Unfortunate Events #11: The Grim Grotto



A Series of Unfortunate Events

Book the Eleventh

by LEMONY SNICKET

THE GRIM GROTTO

A Series of Unfortunate Events
BOOK the Eleventh

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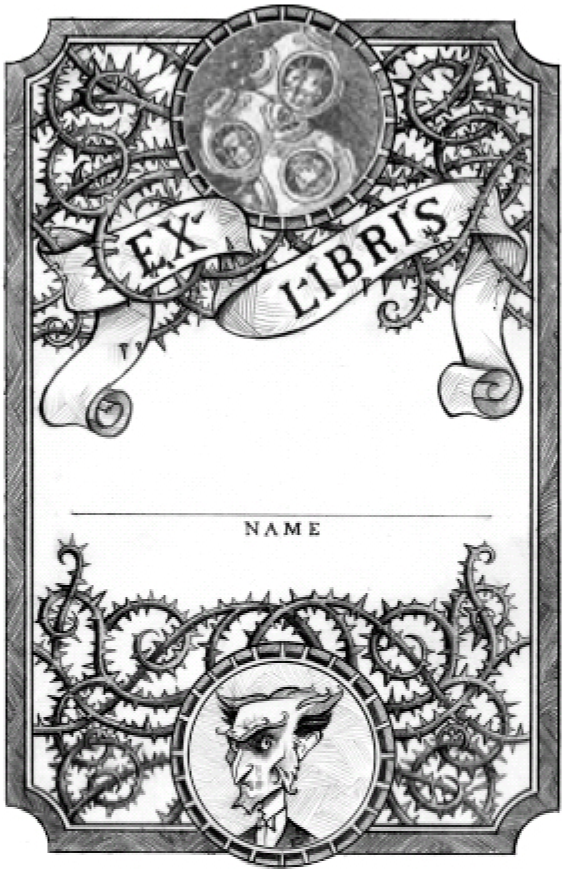
by **LEMONY SNICKET** ***Illustrations by*** ***Brett Helquist***

HarperCollins e-books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NAME

***Dear Reader*,**

Unless you are a slug, a sea anemone, or mildew, you probably prefer not to be damp. You might also prefer not to read this book, in which the Baudelaire siblings encounter an unpleasant amount of dampness as they descend into the depths of despair, underwater.

In fact, the horrors they encounter are too numerous to list, and you wouldn�t want me even to mention the worst of it, which includes mushrooms, a desperate search for something lost, a mechanical monster, a distressing message from a lost friend, and tap dancing.

As a dedicated author who has pledged to keep recording the depressing story of the Baudelaires, I must continue to delve deep into the cavernous depths of the orphans� lives. You, on the other hand, may delve into some happier book in order to keep your eyes and your spirits from being dampened.

With all due respect,

Lemony Snicket

Lemony Snicket

A Series of Unfortunate Events * LEMONY SNICKET *

For Beatrice—

Dead women tell no tales.

Sad men write them down.

CHAPTER
One

After a great deal of time examining oceans, investigating rainstorms, and staring very hard at several drinking fountains, the scientists of the world developed a theory regarding how water is distributed around our planet, which they have named “the water cycle.” The water cycle consists of three key phenomena—evaporation, precipitation, and collection—and all of them are equally boring.

Of course, it is boring to read about boring things, but it is better to read something that makes you yawn with boredom than something that will make you weep uncontrollably, pound your fists against the floor, and leave tearstains all over your pillowcase, sheets, and boomerang collection. Like the water cycle, the tale of the Baudelaire children consists of three key phenomena, but rather than read their sorry tale it would be best if you read something about the water cycle instead.

Violet, the eldest phenomenon, was nearly fifteen years old and very nearly the best inventor the world had ever seen. As far as I can tell she was certainly the best inventor who had ever found herself trapped in the gray waters of the Stricken Stream, clinging desperately to a toboggan as she was carried away from the Valley of Four Drafts, and if I were you I would prefer to focus on the boring phenomenon of evaporation, which refers to the process of water turning into vapor and eventually forming clouds, rather than think about the turmoil that awaited her at the bottom of the Mortmain Mountains.

Klaus was the second eldest of the Baudelaire siblings, but it would be better for your health if you concentrated on the boring phenomenon of precipitation, which refers to vapor turning back into water and falling as rain, rather than spending even one moment thinking about the phenomenon of Klaus's excellent skills as a researcher, and the amount of trouble and woe these skills would bring him once he and his siblings met up with Count Olaf, the notorious villain who had been after the children ever since their parents had perished in a terrible fire.

And even Sunny Baudelaire, who had recently passed out of babyhood, is a phenomenon all to herself, not only for her very sharp teeth, which had helped the Baudelaires in a number of unpleasant circumstances, but also for her newfound skills as a cook, which had fed the Baudelaires in a number of unpleasant circumstances. Although the phenomenon of collection, which describes the gathering of fallen rain into one place so it can evaporate once more and begin the entire tedious process all over again, is probably the most boring phenomenon in the water cycle, it would be far better for you to get up and go right to your nearest library and spend several boring days reading every single boring fact you can find about collection, because the phenomenon of what happens to Sunny Baudelaire over the course of these pages is the most dreadful phenomenon I can think of, and I can think of a great many. The water cycle may be a series of boring phenomena, but the story of the Baudelaires is something else entirely, and this is an excellent opportunity to read something boring instead of learning what became of the Baudelaires as the rushing waters of the Stricken Stream carried them away from the mountains.

"What will become of us?" Violet asked, raising her voice to be heard over the rushing water. "I don't think I can invent anything that can stop this toboggan."

"I don't think you should try," Klaus called back to his sister. "The arrival of False Spring has thawed out the stream, but the waters are still very cold. If one of us fell into the stream, I'm not sure how long we could survive."

"Quigley," Sunny whimpered. The youngest Baudelaire often talked in a way that could be difficult to understand, but lately her speech had been developing almost as quickly as her cooking skills, and her siblings knew that Sunny was referring to Quigley Quagmire, with whom the Baudelaires had recently become friends. Quigley had helped Violet and Klaus reach the top of Mount Fraught in order to find the V.F.D. headquarters and rescue Sunny from Count Olaf's clutches, but another tributary of the Stricken Stream had carried him off in the opposite direction, and the cartographer—a word which here means "someone who is very good with maps, and of whom Violet Baudelaire was particularly fond"—didn't even have a toboggan to keep him out of the chilly water.

"I'm sure Quigley has gotten out of the water," Violet said quickly, although of course she was sure of no such thing. "I only wish we knew where he was going. He told us to meet him somewhere, but the waterfall interrupted him."

The toboggan bobbed in the water as Klaus reached into his pocket and drew out a dark blue notebook. The notebook had been a gift from Quigley, and Klaus was using it as a commonplace book, a phrase which here means "notebook in which he wrote any interesting or useful information." "We decoded that message telling us about an important V.F.D. gathering on Thursday," he said, "and thanks to Sunny, we know that the meeting is at the Hotel Denouement. Maybe that's where Quigley wants to meet us—at the last safe place."

"But we don't know where it is," Violet pointed out. "How can we meet someone in an unknown location?"

The three Baudelaires sighed, and for a few moments the siblings sat quietly on the toboggan and listened to the gurgling of the stream. There are some people who like to watch a stream for hours, staring at the glittering water and thinking about the mysteries of the world. But the waters of the Stricken Stream were too dirty to glitter, and every mystery the children tried to solve seemed to reveal even more mysteries, and even those mysteries contained mysteries, so when they pondered these mysteries they felt more overwhelmed than thoughtful. They knew that V.F.D. was a secret organization, but they couldn't seem to find out much about what the organization did, or why it should concern the Baudelaires. They knew that Count Olaf was very eager to get his filthy hands on a certain sugar bowl, but they had no idea why the sugar bowl was so important, or where in the world it was. They knew that there were people in the world who could help them, but so many of these people—guardians, friends, bankers—had proven to be of no help at all, or had vanished from their lives just when the Baudelaires needed them most. And they knew there were people in the world who would not help them—villainous people, and their number seemed to be growing as their treachery and wickedness trickled all over the earth, like a dreadful water cycle of woe and despair. But right now the biggest mystery seemed to be what to do next, and as the Baudelaires huddled together on the floating toboggan they could not think of a thing.

“If we stay on the toboggan,” Violet said finally, “where do you think we’ll go?”

“Down the mountains,” Klaus said. “Water runs downhill. The Stricken Stream probably leads out of the Mortmain Mountains into the hinterlands, and then eventually it’ll lead to some larger body of water—a lake, or an ocean. From there the water will evaporate into clouds, fall as rain and snow, and so on.”

“Tedium,” Sunny said.

“The water cycle is quite dull,” Klaus agreed, “but it might be the easiest way to get us away from Count Olaf.”

“That’s true,” Violet said. “Olaf said he’d be right behind us.”

“Esmelita,” Sunny said, which meant something like, “Along with Esmé Squalor and Carmelita Spats,” and the Baudelaires frowned as they thought of Olaf’s girlfriend, who participated in Olaf’s schemes because she believed that treachery and deception were very stylish, or “in,” and the former classmate of the Baudelaires’ who had recently joined Olaf for selfish reasons of her own.

“So we’re just going to sit on this toboggan,” Violet asked, “and see where it takes us?”

“It’s not much of a plan,” Klaus admitted, “but I can’t think of a better one.”

“Passive,” Sunny said, and her siblings nodded glumly. “Passive” is an unusual word to hear from a baby, and in fact it is an unusual word to hear from a Baudelaire or anyone else who leads an interesting life. It merely means “accepting what is happening without doing anything about it,” and certainly everyone has passive moments from time to time. Perhaps you have experienced a passive moment at the shoe store, when you sat in a chair as the shoe salesperson forced your feet into a series of ugly and uncomfortable shoes, when all the while you wanted a bright red pair with strange buckles that nobody on earth was going to buy for you. The Baudelaires had experienced a passive moment at Briny Beach, where they had learned the terrible news about their parents, and had been numbly led by Mr. Poe toward their new unfortunate lives. I recently experienced a passive moment myself, sitting in a chair as a shoe salesperson forced my feet into a series of ugly and uncomfortable positions, when all the while I wanted a bright red pair of shoes with strange buckles that nobody on earth was going to buy for me. But a passive moment in the middle of a rushing stream, when villainous people are hot on your trail, is a difficult moment to accept, which is why the Baudelaires fidgeted on the toboggan as the Stricken Stream carried them further and further downhill, just as I fidgeted as tried to plan my escape from that sinister shoe emporium. Violet fidgeted and thought of Quigley, hoping he had managed to escape from the cold water and get himself to safety. Klaus fidgeted and thought of V.F.D., hoping that he could still learn more about the organization even though their headquarters had been destroyed. And Sunny fidgeted and thought of the fish in the Stricken Stream, who would occasionally stick their heads out of the ashen water and cough. She was wondering if the ashes, which were left in the water by a recent fire in the mountains and made it difficult for the fish to breathe, would mean the fish wouldn’t taste very good, even if you used a recipe with plenty of butter and lemon.

The Baudelaires were so busy fidgeting and thinking that when the toboggan rounded one of the odd, square sides of the mountain peaks, it was a moment before they noticed the view spread below them. Only when a few scraps of newspaper blew in front of their faces did the Baudelaires look down and gasp at what they saw.

“What is it?” Violet said.

“I don’t know,” Klaus said. “It’s hard to tell from so high up.”

“Subjavik,” Sunny said, and she spoke the truth. From this side of the Mortmain Mountains, the Baudelaires had expected to see the hinterlands, a vast expanse of flat landscape where they had spent quite some time. Instead, it looked like the world had turned into a dark, dark sea. As far as the eye could see there were swirls of gray and black, moving like strange eels in shadowy water. Every so often one of the swirls would release a small, fragile object that would float up toward the Baudelaires like a feather. Some of these objects were scraps of newspaper. Others appeared to be tiny bits of cloth. And some of them were so dark that they were utterly unrecognizable, a phrase Sunny preferred to express as “subjavik.”

Klaus squinted down through his glasses and then turned to his sisters with a look of despair. “I know what it is,” he said quietly. “It’s the ruins of a fire.”

The Baudelaires looked down again and saw that Klaus was right. From such a height, it had taken the children a moment to realize that a great fire had raged through the hinterlands, leaving only ashen scraps behind.

“Of course,” Violet said. “It’s strange we didn’t recognize it before. But who would set fire to the hinterlands?”

“We did,” Klaus said.

“Caligari,” Sunny said, reminding Violet of a terrible carnival in which the Baudelaires had spent some time in disguise. Sadly, as part of their disguise it had been necessary to assist Count Olaf in burning down the carnival, and now they could see the fruits of their labors, a phrase which here means “the results of the terrible thing they did, even though they did not mean to do it at all.”

“The fire isn’t our fault,” Violet said. “Not entirely. We *had* to help Olaf, otherwise he would have discovered our disguises.”

“He discovered our disguises anyway,” Klaus pointed out.

“Noblaym,” Sunny said, which meant something like, “But it’s still not our fault.”

“Sunny’s right,” Violet said. “We didn’t think up the plot—Olaf did.”

“We didn’t stop him, either,” Klaus pointed out. “And plenty of people think we’re entirely responsible. These scraps of newspaper are probably from *The Daily Punctilio,* which has blamed us for all sorts of terrible crimes.”

“You’re right,” Violet said with a sigh, although I have since discovered that Klaus was wrong, and that the scraps of paper blowing past the Baudelaires were from another publication that would have been of enormous help had they stopped to collect the pieces. “Maybe we should be passive for a while. Being active hasn’t helped us much.”

“In any case,” Klaus said, “we should stay on the toboggan. Fire can’t hurt us if we’re floating on a stream.”

“It doesn’t seem like we have a choice,” Violet said. “Look.”

The Baudelaires looked, and saw that the toboggan was approaching a sort of intersection, where another tributary of the Stricken Stream was meeting up with theirs. The stream was now much wider, and the water even rougher, so the Baudelaires had to hang on tight in order not to be thrown into the deepening waters.

“We must be approaching a larger body of water,” Klaus said. “We’re further along in the water cycle than I thought.”

“Do you think that’s the tributary that carried away Quigley?” Violet said, craning her neck to look for her missing friend.

“Selphawa!” Sunny cried, which meant “We can’t think about Quigley now—we have to think about ourselves,” and the youngest Baudelaire was right. With a great *whoosh!* the stream turned another square corner, and within moments the waters of the stream were churning so violently that it felt as if the Baudelaires were riding a wild horse rather than a broken toboggan.

“Can you steer the toboggan toward the shore?” Klaus yelled over the sound of the stream.

“No!” Violet cried. “The steering mechanism broke when we rode down the waterfall, and the stream is too wide to paddle there!” Violet found a ribbon in her pocket and paused to tie up her hair in order to think better. She gazed down at the toboggan and tried to think of various mechanical blueprints she had read in her childhood, when her parents were alive and supportive of her interests in mechanical engineering. “The runners of the toboggan,” she said, and then repeated it in a shout to be heard over the water. “The runners! They help the toboggan maneuver on the snow, but maybe they can help us steer on the water!”

“Where are the runners?” Klaus asked, looking around.

“On the bottom of the toboggan!” Violet cried.

“Imposiyakto?” Sunny asked, which meant something like, “How can we get to the bottom of the toboggan?”

“I don’t know,” Violet said, and frantically checked her pockets for any inventing materials. She had been carrying a long bread knife, but now it was gone—probably carried away by the stream, along with Quigley, when she had used it last. She looked straight ahead, at the frothy rush of water threatening to engulf them. She gazed at the distant shores of the stream, which grew more and more distant as the stream continued to widen. And she looked at her siblings, who were waiting for her inventing skills to save them. Her siblings looked back, and all three Baudelaires looked at one another for a moment, blinking dark water out of their eyes, as they tried to think of something to do.

Just at that moment, however, one more eye arrived, also blinking dark water as it rose out of the stream, right in front of the Baudelaires. At first it seemed to be the eye of some terrible sea creature, found only in books of mythology and in the swimming pools of certain resorts. But as the toboggan took them closer, the children could see that the eye was made of metal, perched on top of a long metal pole that curved at the top so the eye could get a better look at them. It is very unusual to see a metal eye rising up out of the rushing waters of a stream, and yet this eye was something the Baudelaires had seen many times, since their first encounter with an eye tattoo on Count Olaf's left ankle. The eye was an insignia, and when you looked at it in a certain way it also looked like three mysterious letters.

"V.F.D.!" Sunny cried, as the toboggan drew even closer.

"What is it?" Klaus asked.

"It's a periscope!" Violet said. "Submarines use them to look at things above the water!"

"Does that mean," Klaus cried, "that there's a submarine beneath us?"

Violet did not have to answer, because the eye rose further out of the water, and the orphans could see that the pole was attached to a large, flat piece of metal, most of which was under the water. The toboggan drew closer until the periscope was in reach, and then stopped, the way a raft will stop when it hits a large rock.

"Look!" Violet cried as the stream rushed around them. She pointed to a hatch just at the bottom of the periscope. "Let's knock—maybe they can hear us!"

"But we have no idea who's inside," Klaus said.

"Taykashans!" Sunny shrieked, which meant "It's our only chance to travel safely through these waters," and she leaned down to the hatch and scraped at it with her teeth. Her siblings joined her, preferring to use their fists to pound on the metal hatch.

“Hello!” Violet cried.

“Hello!” Klaus yelled.

“Shalom!” Sunny shrieked.

Over the sound of the rushing stream, the Baudelaires heard a very dim sound coming from behind the hatch. The sound was a human voice, very deep and echoey as if it were coming from the bottom of a well. “Friend or foe?” it said.

The Baudelaires looked at one another. They knew, as I’m sure you know, that “friend or foe” is a traditional greeting directed at visitors who approach an important place, such as a royal palace or a fiercely guarded shoe store, and must identify themselves as either a friend or a foe of the people inside. But the siblings did not know if they were friends or foes for the simple reason that they had no idea who was talking.

“What should we say?” Violet asked, lowering her voice. “The eye might mean that it’s Count Olaf’s submarine, in which case we’re foes.”

“The eye might mean that it’s V.F.D.’s submarine,” Klaus said, “in which case we’re friends.”

“Obvio!” Sunny said, which meant “There’s only one answer that will get us into the submarine,” and she called down to the hatch, “Friend!”

There was a pause, and the echoey voice spoke again. “Password, please,” it said.

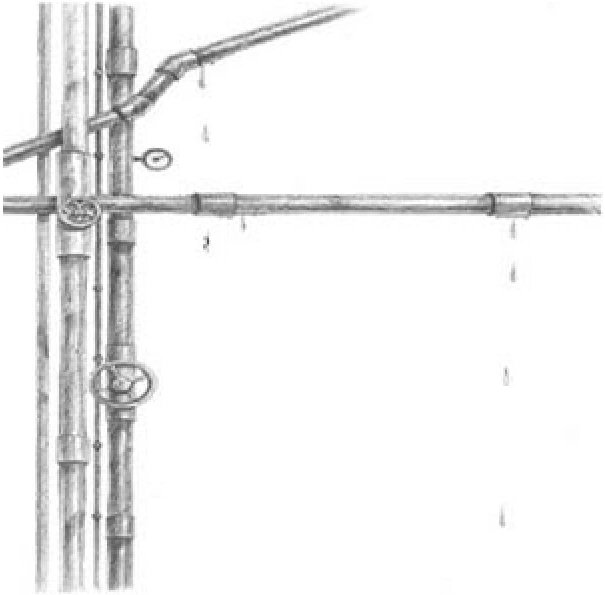
The Baudelaires looked at one another again. A password, of course, is a certain word or phrase that one utters in order to receive information or enter a secret place, and the siblings of course had no idea what they should say in order to enter a submarine. For a moment none of the children said anything, merely tried to think, although they wished it were quieter so they could think without the distractions of the sounds of the rushing of water and the coughing of fish. They wished that instead of being stranded on a toboggan in the middle of the Stricken Stream, they were in some quiet room, such as the Baudelaire library, where they could sit in silence and read up on what the password might be. But as the three siblings thought of one library, one sibling remembered another: the ruined V.F.D. library, up in the Valley of Four Drafts where the headquarters had once stood. Violet thought of an iron archway, one of the few remnants of the library, and the motto that was etched into it. The eldest Baudelaire looked at her siblings and then leaned down to the hatch and repeated the mysterious words she had seen, and that she hoped would bring her and her siblings to safety.

“The world is quiet here,” she said.

There was a pause, and with a loud, metallic *creak,* the hatch opened, and the siblings peered into a dark hole, which had a ladder running along the side so they could climb down. They shivered, and not just from the icy chill of the mountain winds and the rushing dark waters of the Stricken Stream. They shivered because they did not know where they were going, or who they might meet if they climbed down into the hole. Instead of entering, the Baudelaires wanted to call something else down the hatch—the same words that had been called up to them. “Friend or foe?” they wanted to say. “Friend or foe?” Would it be safer to enter the submarine, or safer to risk their lives outside, in the rushing waters of the Stricken Stream?

“Enter, Baudelaires,” the voice said, and whether it belonged to friend or foe, the Baudelaires decided to climb inside.

CHAPTER
Two



“Right down here!” the echoey voice said, as the Baudelaire orphans began their journey down the ladder. “Aye! Mind the ladder! Close the hatch behind you! Don’t rush! No—take your time! Don’t fall! Mind your step! Aye! Don’t trip! Don’t make noise! Don’t scare me! Don’t look down! No—look where you’re going! Don’t bring any flammable liquids with you! Watch your feet! Aye! No—watch your back! No—watch your mouth! No—watch yourselves! Aye!”

“Aye?” Sunny whispered to her siblings.

“ ‘Aye,’ ” Klaus explained quietly, “is another word for ‘yes.’”

“Aye!” the voice said again. “Keep your eyes open! Look out below! Look out above! Look out for spies! Look out for one another! Look out! Aye! Be very careful! Be very aware! Be very much! Take a break! No—

keep going! Stay awake! Calm down! Cheer up! Keep climbing! Keep your shirt on! Aye!”

As desperate as their situation was, the Baudelaires almost found themselves giggling. The voice was shouting out so many instructions, and so few of them made sense, that it would have been impossible for the children to follow them, and the voice was quite cheerful and a bit scattered, as if whoever was talking did not really care if their instructions were followed and had probably forgotten them already. “Hold on to the railing!” the voice continued, as the Baudelaires spotted a light at the end of the passageway. “Aye! No—hold on to yourselves! No—hold on to your hats! No—hold on to your hands! No—hold on! Wait a minute! Wait a second! Stop waiting! Stop war! Stop injustice! Stop bothering me! Aye!”

Sunny had been the first to enter the passageway, and so she was the first to reach the bottom and lower herself carefully into a small, dim room with a very low ceiling. Standing in the center of the room was an enormous man dressed in a shiny suit made of some sort of slippery-looking material with equally slippery-looking boots on his feet. On the front of the suit was a portrait of a man with a beard, although the man himself had no beard, merely a very long mustache curled up at both ends like a pair of parentheses. “One of you is a baby!” he cried, as Klaus and Violet lowered themselves next to their sister. “Aye! No—both of you are babies! No—there’s three of you! No—none of you are babies! Well, one of you sort of is a baby! Welcome! Aye! Hello! Good afternoon! Howdy! Shake my hand! Aye!”

The Baudelaires hurriedly shook the man’s hand, which was covered in a glove made of the same slippery material. “My name is Violet B—”Violet started to say.

“Baudelaire!” the man interrupted. “I know! I’m not stupid! Aye! And you’re Klaus and Sunny! You’re the Baudelaires! The three Baudelaire children! Aye! The ones *The Daily Punctilio* blames for every crime they can think of but you’re really innocent but nevertheless in a big heap of trouble! Of course! Nice to meet you! In person! So to speak! Let’s go! Follow me! Aye!”

The man whirled around and stomped out of the room, leaving the bewildered Baudelaires little else to do but follow him down a corridor. The corridor was covered in metal pipes that ran along the walls, floor, and ceiling, so that the Baudelaires sometimes had to duck, or step very high, in order to make their way. Occasionally drops of water would drip from one of the pipes and land on their heads, but they were already so damp from the Stricken Stream that they scarcely noticed. Besides, they were far too busy trying to follow what the man was saying to think of anything else.

"Let's see! I'll put you to work right away! Aye! No—first I'll give you a tour! No—I'll give you lunch! No—I'll introduce you to my crew! No—I'll let you rest! No—I'd better get you into uniforms! Aye! It's important that everyone aboard wear a waterproof uniform in case the submarine collapses and we find ourselves underwater! Of course, in that case we'll need diving helmets! Except Sunny because she can't wear one! I guess she'll drown! No—she can curl up inside a diving helmet! Aye! The helmets have a tiny door on the neck just for such a purpose! Aye! I've seen it done! I've seen so many things in my time!"

"Excuse me," Violet said, "but could you tell us who you are?"

The man whirled around to face the children and held his hands up over his head. *"What?"* he roared. "You don't know who I am? I've never been so insulted in my life! No—I have. Many times, in fact. Aye! I remember when Count Olaf turned to me and said, in that horrible voice of his—No, never mind. I'll tell you. I'm Captain Widdershins. That's spelled W-I-D-D-E-R-S-H-I-N-S. Backward it's S-N-I-H-S-R—well, never mind. Nobody spells it backward! Except people who have no respect for the alphabet! And they're not here! Are they?"

"No," Klaus said. "We have a great deal of respect for the alphabet."

"I should say so!" the captain cried. "Klaus Baudelaire disrespect the alphabet? Why, it's unthinkable! Aye! It's illegal! It's impossible! It's not true! How dare you say so! No—you didn't say so! I apologize! One thousand pardons! Aye!"

"Is this your submarine, Captain Widdershins?" Violet asked.

“What?” the captain roared. “You don’t know whose submarine it is? A renowned inventor like yourself and you haven’t the faintest sense of basic submarine history? Of course this is my submarine! It’s been my submarine for years! Aye! Have you never heard of Captain Widdershins and the *Queequeg*? Have you never heard of the Submarine Q and Its Crew of Two? That’s a little nickname I made up myself! With a little help! Aye! I would think Josephine would have told you about the *Queequeg*! After all, I patrolled Lake Lachrymose for years! Poor Josephine! There’s not a day I don’t think of her! Aye! Except some days when it slips my mind!”

“Nottooti?” Sunny asked.

“I was told it would take me some time to understand everything you said,” the captain said, looking down at Sunny. “I’m not sure I’ll find the time to learn another foreign language! Aye! Perhaps I could enroll in some night classes!”

“What my sister means,” Violet said quickly, “is that she’s curious how you know so much about us.”

“How does anyone know anything about anything?” the captain replied. “I read it, of course! Aye! I’ve read every Volunteer Factual Dispatch I’ve received! Although lately I haven’t received any! Aye! That’s why I’m glad you happened along! Aye! I thought I might faint when I peered through the periscope and saw your damp little faces staring back at me! Aye! I was sure it was you, but I didn’t hesitate to ask you the password! Aye! I never hesitate! Aye! That’s my personal philosophy!”

The captain stopped in the middle of the hallway, and pointed to a brass rectangle that was attached to a wall. It was a plaque, a word which here means “metal rectangle with words carved on it, usually to indicate that something important has happened on the spot where the rectangle is attached.” This plaque had a large V.F.D. eye carved into the top, watching over the words THE CAPTAIN’S PERSONAL PHILOSOPHY carved in enormous letters, but the Baudelaires had to lean in close to see what was printed beneath it.

"'He who hesitates is lost'!" the captain cried, pointing at each word with a thick, gloved finger.

"'Or she,'" Violet added, pointing to a pair of words that someone had added in scratchy handwriting.

"My stepdaughter added that," Captain Widdershins said. "And she's right! 'Or she'! One day I was walking down this very hallway and I realized that anyone can be lost if they hesitate! A giant octopus could be chasing you, and if you decided to pause for a moment and tie your shoes, what would happen? All would be lost, that's what would happen! Aye! That's why it's my personal philosophy! I never hesitate! Never! Aye! Well, sometimes I do! But I try not to! Because He or she who hesitates is lost! Let's go!"

Without hesitating a moment longer at the plaque, Captain Widdershins whirled around and led the children further down the corridor, which echoed with the odd sound of his waterproof boots each time he took a step. The children were a bit dizzy from the captain's chatter, and they were thinking about his personal philosophy and whether or not it ought to be their personal philosophies as well. Having a personal philosophy is like having a pet marmoset, because it may be very attractive when you acquire it, but there may be situations when it will not come in handy at all. "He or she who hesitates is lost" sounded like a reasonable philosophy at first glance, but the Baudelaires could think of situations in which hesitating might be the best thing to do. Violet was glad she'd hesitated when she and her siblings were living with Aunt Josephine, otherwise she might never have realized the importance of the peppermints she found in her pocket. Klaus was glad he'd hesitated at Heimlich Hospital, otherwise he might never have thought of a way to disguise Sunny and himself as medical professionals so they could rescue Violet from having unnecessary surgery. And Sunny was glad she'd hesitated outside Count Olaf's tent on Mount Fraught, otherwise she might never have overheard the name of the last safe place, which the Baudelaires still hoped to reach. But despite all these incidents in which hesitation had been very helpful, the children did not wish to adopt "He or she who does not hesitate is lost" as their personal philosophy, because a giant octopus might come along at any moment, particularly when the Baudelaires were on board a submarine, and the siblings would be very foolish to hesitate if the octopus were coming after them. Perhaps, the Baudelaires thought, the wisest personal philosophy concerning hesitation would be "Sometimes he or she should hesitate and sometimes he or she should not hesitate," but this seemed far too long and vague to be much use on a plaque.

"Maybe if I hadn't hesitated," the captain continued, "the *Queequeg* would have been repaired by now! Aye! The Submarine Q and Its Crew of Two is not in the best of shape, I'm afraid! Aye! We've been attacked by villains and leeches, by sharks and realtors, by pirates and girlfriends, by torpedoes and angry salmon! Aye!" He stopped at a thick metal door, turned to the Baudelaires, and sighed. "Everything from the radar mechanisms to my alarm clock is malfunctioning! Aye! That's why I'm glad you're here, Violet Baudelaire! We're desperate for someone with mechanical smarts!"

"I'll see what I can do," Violet said.

"Well, take a look!" Captain Widdershins cried, and swung open the door. The Baudelaires followed him into an enormous, cavernous room that echoed when the captain spoke. There were pipes on the ceiling, pipes on the floor, and pipes sticking out of the walls at all angles. Between the pipes was a bewildering array of panels with knobs, gears, and tiny screens, as well as tiny signs saying things like, DANGER!, WARNING!, and HE OR SHE WHO HESITATES IS LOST! Here and there were a few green lights, and at the far end was an enormous wooden table piled with books, maps, and dirty dishes, which stood beneath an enormous porthole, a word which here means "round window through which the Baudelaires could see the filthy waters of the Stricken Stream."

"This is the belly of the beast!" the captain said. "Aye! It's the center of all operations aboard the *Queequeg*! This is where we control the submarine, eat our meals, research our missions, and play board games when we're tired of working!" He strode over to one panel and ducked his head beneath it. "Fiona!" he called. "Come out of there!"

There was a faint rattling sound, and then the children saw something race out from under the panel and halfway across the floor. In the dim green light it took a moment to see it was a girl a bit older than Violet, who was lying faceup on a small wheeled platform. She was wearing a suit just like Captain Widdershins's, with the same portrait of the bearded man on the front, and had a flashlight in one hand and a pair of pliers in the other. Smiling, she handed the pliers to her stepfather, who helped her up from the platform as she put on a pair of eyeglasses with triangular frames.

"Baudelaires," the captain said, "this is Fiona, my stepdaughter. Fiona, this is Violet, Klaus, and Sunny Baudelaire."

"Charmed," she said, extending a gloved hand first to Violet, then to Klaus, and finally to Sunny, who gave Fiona a big toothy smile. "I'm sorry I wasn't upstairs to meet you. I've been trying to repair this telegram device, but electrical repairwork is not my specialty."

"Aye!" the captain said. "For quite some time we've stopped receiving telegrams, but Fiona can't seem to make heads or tails of the device! Violet, get to work!"

"You'll have to forgive the way my stepfather speaks," Fiona said, putting an arm around him. "It can take some getting used to."

"We don't have time to get used to anything!" Captain Widdershins cried. "This is no time to be passive! He who hesitates is lost!"

"Or she," Fiona corrected quietly. "Come on, Violet, I'll get you a uniform. If you're wondering whose portrait is on the front, it's Herman Melville."

"He's one of my favorite authors," Klaus said. "I really enjoy the way he dramatizes the plight of overlooked people, such as poor sailors or exploited youngsters, through his strange, often experimental philosophical prose."

"I should have known you liked him," Fiona replied. "When Josephine's house fell into the lake, my stepfather and I managed to save some of her library before it became too soaked. I read some of your decoding notes, Klaus. You're a very perceptive researcher."

“It’s very kind of you to say so,” Klaus said.

“Aye!” the captain cried. “A perceptive researcher is just what we need!” He stomped over to the table and lifted a pile of papers. “A certain taxi driver managed to smuggle these charts to me,” he said, “but I can’t make head or tail of them! They’re confusing! They’re confounding! They’re conversational! No—that’s not what I mean!”

“I think you mean *convoluted*,” Klaus said, peering at the charts. “‘Conversational’ means ‘having to do with conversations,’ but ‘convoluted’ means ‘complicated.’ What kind of charts are they?”

“Tidal charts!” the captain cried. “We have to figure out the exact course of the predominant tides at the point where the Stricken Stream meets the sea! Klaus, I want you to find a uniform and then get to work immediately! Aye!”

“Aye!” Klaus said, trying to get into the spirit of the *Queequeg*.

“Aye!” the captain answered in a happy roar.

“I?” Sunny asked.

“Aye!” the captain said. “I haven’t forgotten you, Sunny! I’d never forget Sunny! Never in a million years! Not that I will live that long! Particularly because I don’t exercise very much! But I don’t like exercising, so it’s worth it! Why, I remember when they wouldn’t let me go mountain climbing because I hadn’t trained properly, and—”

“Perhaps you should tell Sunny what you have in mind for her to do,” Fiona said gently.

“Of course!” the captain cried. “Naturally! Our other crewman has been in charge of cooking, but all he does is make these terrible damp casseroles! I’m tired of them! I’m hoping your cooking skills might improve our meal situation!”

"Sous," Sunny said modestly, which meant something like, "I haven't been cooking for very long," and her siblings were quick to translate.

"Well, we're in a hurry!" the captain replied, walking over to a far door marked KITCHEN. "We can't wait for Sunny to become an expert chef before getting to work! He or she who hesitates is lost!" He opened the door and called inside. "Cookie! Get out here and meet the Baudelaires!"

The children heard some quiet, uneven footsteps, as if the cook had something wrong with one leg, and then a man limped through the door, wearing the same uniform as the captain and a wide smile on his face.

"Baudelaires!" he said. "I always believed I would see you again someday!"

The three siblings looked at the man and then at one another in stupefaction, a word which here means "amazement at seeing a man for the first time since their stay at Lucky Smells Lumbermill, when his kindness toward them had been one of the few positive aspects of that otherwise miserable chapter in their lives." "Phil!" Violet cried. "What on earth are you doing here?"

"He's the second of our crew of two!" the captain cried. "Aye! The original second in the crew of two was Fiona's mother, but she died in a manatee accident quite a few years ago."

"I'm not so sure it was an accident," Fiona said.

"Then we had Jacques!" the captain continued. "Aye, and then what's-his-name, Jacques's brother, and then a dreadful woman who turned out to be a spy, and finally we have Phil! Although I like to call him Cookie! I don't know why!"

"I was tired of working in the lumber industry," Phil said. "I was sure I could find a better job, and look at me now—cook on a dilapidated submarine. Life keeps on getting better and better."

"You always were an optimist," Klaus said.

“We don’t need an optimist!” Captain Widdershins said. “We need a cook! Get to work, Baudelaires! All of you! Aye! We have no time to waste! He who hesitates is lost!”

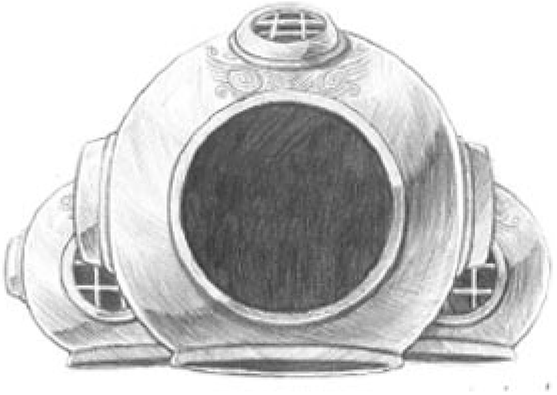
“Or she,” Fiona reminded her stepfather. “And do we really have to start right this minute? I’m sure the Baudelaires are exhausted from their journey. We could spend a nice quiet evening playing board games—”

“Board games?” the captain said in astonishment. “Amusements? Entertainments? We don’t have time for such things! Aye! Today’s Saturday, which means we only have five days left! Thursday is the V.F.D. gathering, and I don’t want anyone at the Hotel Denouement to say that the *Queequeg* hasn’t performed its mission!”

“Mission?” Sunny asked.

“Aye!” Captain Widdershins said. “We mustn’t hesitate! We must act! We must hurry! We must move! We must search! We must investigate! We must hunt! We must pursue! We must stop occasionally for a brief snack! We must find that sugar bowl before Count Olaf does! Aye!”

CHAPTER
Three



The expression “Shiver me timbers!” comes from the society of pirates, who enjoy using interesting expressions almost as much as jumping aboard other people’s ships and stealing their valuables. It is an expression of extreme amazement, used in circumstances when one feels as if one’s very bones, or timbers, are shivering. I have not used the expression since one rainy night when it was necessary to pose as a pirate experiencing amazement, but when Captain Widdershins told the Baudelaire orphans where the *Queequeg* was going and what it was searching for, there was a perfect opportunity to utter these words.

“Shiver me timbers!” Sunny cried.

“Your timbers!” the captain cried back. “Are the Baudelaires practicing piracy? Aye! My heavens! If your parents knew that you were stealing the treasures of others—”

“We’re not pirates, Captain Widdershins,” Violet said hastily. “Sunny is just using an expression she learned from an old movie. She just means that we’re surprised.”

"Surprised?" The captain paced up and down in front of them, his waterproof suit crinkling with every step. "Do you think the *Queequeg* made its difficult way up the Stricken Stream just for my own personal amusement? Aye? Do you think I would risk such terrible danger simply because I had no other plans for the afternoon? Aye? Do you think it was a crazy coincidence that you ran into our periscope? Aye? Do you think this uniform makes me look fat? Aye? Do you think members of V.F.D. would just sit and twiddle their thumbs while Count Olaf's treachery covers the land like crust covers the filling of a pie? Aye?"

"You were looking for us?" Klaus asked in amazement. He was tempted to cry "Shiver me timbers!" like his sister, but he did not want to alarm Captain Widdershins any further.

"For you!" the captain cried. "Aye! For the sugar bowl! Aye! For justice! Aye! And liberty! Aye! For an opportunity to make the world quiet! Aye! And safe! Aye! And we may only have until Thursday! Aye! We're in terrible danger! Aye! So get to work!"

"Bamboozle!" Sunny cried.

"My sister is confused," Violet said, "and so are we, Captain Widdershins. If we could just stop for a moment, and hear your story from the beginning—"

"Stop for a moment?" the captain repeated in astonishment. "I've just explained our desperate circumstances, and you're asking me to hesitate? My dear girl, remember my personal philosophy! Aye! 'He or she who hesitates is lost'! Now let's get moving!"

The children looked at one another in frustration. They did not want to get moving. It felt to the Baudelaire orphans that they had been moving almost constantly since that terrible day at the beach when their lives had been turned upside down. They had moved into Count Olaf's home, and then into the homes of various guardians. They had moved away from a village intent on burning them at the stake, and they had moved into a hospital that had burst into flames around them. They had moved to the hinterlands in the trunk of Count Olaf's car, and they had moved away from the hinterlands in disguise. They had moved up the Mortmain Mountains hoping to find one of their parents, and they had moved down the Mortmain Mountains thinking they would never see their parents again, and now, in a tiny submarine in the Stricken Stream, they wanted to stop moving, just for a little while, and receive some answers to questions they had been asking themselves since all this moving began.

"Stepfather," Fiona said gently, "why don't you start up the *Queequeg*'s engines, and I'll show the Baudelaires where our spare uniforms are?"

"I'm the captain!" the captain announced. "Aye! I'll give the orders around here!" Then he shrugged, and squinted up toward the ceiling. The Baudelaires noticed for the first time a ladder of rope running up the side of wall. It led up to a small shelf, where the children could see a large wheel, probably for steering, and a few rusty levers and switches that were Byzantine in their design, a phrase which here means "so complicated that perhaps even Violet Baudelaire would have trouble working them." "I order myself to go up the ladder," the captain continued a bit sheepishly, "and start the engines of the *Queequeg*." With one last "Aye!" the captain began hoisting himself toward the ceiling, and the Baudelaires were left alone with Fiona and Phil.

"You must be overwhelmed, Baudelaires," Phil said. "I remember my first day aboard the *Queequeg*—it made Lucky Smells Lumbermill seem calm and quiet!"

"Phil, why don't you get the Baudelaires some soda, while I find them some uniforms?" Fiona said.

"Soda?" Phil said, with a nervous glance at the captain, who was already halfway up the ladder. "We're supposed to save the soda for a special occasion."

"It *is* a special occasion," Fiona said. "We're welcoming three more volunteers on board. What kind of soda do you prefer, Baudelaires?"

"Anything but parsley," Violet said, referring to a beverage enjoyed by Esmé Squalor.

“I’ll bring you some lemon-lime,” Phil said. “Sailors should always make sure there’s plenty of citrus in their system. I’m so glad to see you, children. You know, I wouldn’t be here if it weren’t for you. I was so horrified after what happened in Paltryville that I couldn’t stay at Lucky Smells, and since then my life has been one big adventure!”

“I’m sorry that your leg never healed,” Klaus said, referring to Phil’s limp. “I didn’t realize the accident with the stamping machine was so serious.”

“That’s not why I’m limping,” Phil said. “I was bitten by a shark last week. It was very painful, but I’m quite lucky. Most people never get an opportunity to get so close to such a deadly animal!”

The Baudelaires watched him as he limped back through the kitchen door, whistling a bouncy tune. “Was Phil always optimistic when you knew him?” Fiona asked.

“Always,” Violet said, and her siblings nodded in agreement. “We’ve never known anyone who could remain so cheerful, no matter what terrible things occurred.”

“To tell you the truth, I sometimes find it a bit tiresome,” Fiona said, adjusting her triangular glasses. “Shall we find you some uniforms?”

The Baudelaires nodded, and followed Fiona out of the Main Hall and back into the narrow corridor. “I know you have a lot of questions,” she said, “so I’ll try to tell you everything I know. My stepfather believes that he or she who hesitates is lost, but I have a more cautious personal philosophy.”

“We’d be very grateful if you might tell us a few things,” Klaus said. “First, how do you know who we are? Why were you looking for us? How did you know how to find us?”

“That’s a lot of firsts,” Fiona said with a smile. “I think you Baudelaires are forgetting that your exploits haven’t exactly been a secret. Nearly every day there’s been a story about you in one of the most popular newspapers.”

“*The Daily Punctilio*?” Violet asked. “I hope you haven’t been believing the dreadful lies they’ve been printing about us.”

“Of course not,” Fiona said. “But even the most ridiculous of stories can contain a grain of truth. *The Daily Punctilio* said that you’d murdered a man in the Village of Fowl Devotees, and then set fires at Heimlich Hospital and Caligari Carnival. We knew, of course, that you hadn’t committed these crimes, but we could tell that you had been there. My stepfather and I figured that you’d found the secret stain on Madame Lulu’s map, and were headed for the V.F.D. headquarters.”

Klaus gasped. “You know about Madame Lulu,” he said, “and the coded stain?”

“My stepfather taught that code to Madame Lulu,” Fiona explained, “a long time ago, when they were both young. Well, we heard about the destruction of the headquarters, so we assumed that you’d be heading back down the mountain. So I set a course for the *Queequeg* to journey up the Stricken Stream.”

“You traveled all the way up here,” Klaus said, “just to find us?”

Fiona looked down. “Well, no,” she said. “You weren’t the only thing at V.F.D. headquarters. One of our Volunteer Factual Dispatches told us that the sugar bowl was there as well.”

“Dephinpat?” Sunny asked.

“What are Volunteer Factual Dispatches, exactly?” Violet translated.

“They’re a way of sharing information,” Fiona said. “It’s difficult for volunteers to meet up with one another, so when they unlock a mystery they can write it in a telegram. That way, important information gets circulated, and before long our commonplace books will be full of information we can use to defeat our enemies. A commonplace book is a—”

“We know what a commonplace book is,” Klaus said, and removed his dark blue notebook from his pocket. “I’ve been keeping one myself.”

Fiona smiled, and drummed her gloved fingers on the cover of Klaus's book. "I should have known," she said. "If your sisters want to start books themselves, we should have a few spares. Everything's in our supply room."

"So are we going up to the ruins of the headquarters," Violet asked, "to get the sugar bowl? We didn't see it there."

"We think someone threw it out the window," Fiona answered, "when the fire began. If they threw the sugar bowl from the kitchen, it would have landed in the Stricken Stream and been carried by the water cycle all the way down the mountains. We were seeing if it could be found at the bottom of the stream when we happened upon you three."

"The stream probably carried it much further than this," Klaus said thoughtfully.

"I think so too," Fiona agreed. "I'm hoping that you can discover its location by studying my stepfather's tidal charts. I can't make head or tail of them."

"I'll show you how to read them," Klaus said. "It's not difficult."

"That's what frightens me," Fiona said. "If those charts aren't difficult to read, then Count Olaf might have a chance of finding the sugar bowl before we do. My stepfather says that if the sugar bowl falls into his hands, then all of the efforts of all of the volunteers will be for naught."

The Baudelaires nodded, and the four children made their way down the corridor in silence. The phrase "for naught" is simply a fancy way of saying "for nothing," and it doesn't matter which phrase you use, for they are both equally difficult to admit. Later this afternoon, for instance, I will enter a large room full of sand, and if I do not find the test tube I am looking for, it will be difficult to admit that I have sifted through all that sand for nothing. If you insist on finishing this book, you will find it difficult to admit, between bouts of weeping, that you have read this story for naught, and that it would have been better to page through tedious descriptions of the water cycle. And the Baudelaires did not want to find themselves admitting that all of their troubles had been for naught, that all their adventures meant nothing, and that their entire lives were naught and nothing, if Count Olaf managed to find this crucial sugar bowl before they did. The three siblings followed Fiona down the dim corridor and hoped that their time aboard the *Queequeg* would not be another terrifying journey ending in more disappointment, disillusionment, and despair.

For the moment, however, their journey ended at a small door where Fiona stopped and turned to face the Baudelaires. “This is our supply room,” she said. “Inside you’ll find uniforms for the three of you, although even our smallest size might be too big for Sunny.”

“Pinstripe,” Sunny said. She meant something like, “Don’t worry—I’m used to ill-fitting clothing,” and her siblings were quick to translate.

“You’ll need diving helmets, too,” Fiona said. “This is an old submarine, and it could spring a leak. If the leak is serious, the pressure of the water could cause the walls of the *Queequeg* to collapse, filling all these rooms and corridors with water. The oxygen systems contained in the diving helmets enable you to breathe underwater—for a short time, anyway.”

“Your stepfather said that the helmets would be too big for Sunny, and that she’d have to curl up inside one,” Violet said. “Is that safe?”

“Safe but uncomfortable,” Fiona said, “like everything else on the *Queequeg.* This submarine used to be in wonderful shape, but without anyone who knows about mechanics, it’s not quite up to its former glory. Many of the rooms have flooded, so I’m sorry to say that we’ll be sleeping in very tight quarters. I hope you like bunk beds.”

“We’ve slept on worse,” Klaus said.

“So I hear,” Fiona replied. “I read a description of the Orphans Shack at Prufrock Preparatory School. That sounded terrible.”

“So you knew about us, even then?” Violet asked. “Why didn’t you find us sooner?”

Fiona sighed. “We knew about you,” she said. “Every day I would read terrible stories in the newspaper, but my stepfather said we couldn’t do anything about all the treachery those stories contained.”

“Why not?” Klaus asked.

“He said your troubles were too enormous,” she replied.

“I don’t understand,” Violet said.

“I don’t really understand, either,” Fiona admitted. “My stepfather said that the amount of treachery in this world is enormous, and that the best we could do was one small noble thing. That’s why we’re looking for the sugar bowl. You’d think that accomplishing such a small task would be easy, but we’ve been looking for ages and still haven’t found it.”

“But what’s so important about the sugar bowl?” Klaus asked.

Fiona sighed again, and blinked several times behind her triangular glasses. She looked so sad that the middle Baudelaire almost wished he hadn’t asked. “I don’t know,” she said. “He won’t tell me.”

“Whyno?” Sunny asked.

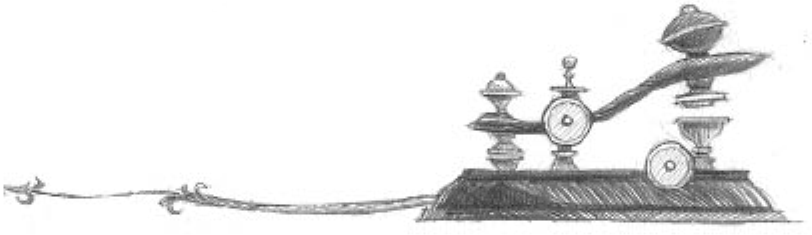
“He said it was better I didn’t know,” Fiona said. “I guess that’s enormous, too—an enormous secret. He said people had been destroyed for knowing such enormous secrets, and that he didn’t want me in that sort of danger.”

“But you’re already in danger,” Klaus said. “We’re all in danger. We’re on board an unstable submarine, trying to find a tiny, important object before a nefarious villain gets his hands on it.”

Fiona turned the handle of the door, which opened with a long, loud *creak* that made the Baudelaires shiver. The room was very small and very dim, lit only by one small green light, and for a moment, it looked like the room was full of people staring silently at the children in the corridor. But then the siblings saw it was just a row of uniforms, hanging limply from hooks along the wall. “I guess there are worse dangers,” Fiona said quietly. “I guess there are dangers we simply can’t imagine.”

The Baudelaires looked at their companion and then at the eerie row of empty uniforms. On a shelf above the waterproof suits was a row of large diving helmets, round spheres of metal with small circular windows in the middle so the children would be able to see out when they put them on. In the dim green light, the helmets looked a bit like eyes, glaring at the Baudelaires from the supply room just as the eye on Count Olaf’s ankle had glared at them so many times before. Although they still weren’t pirates, the siblings were tempted to say “shiver me timbers” once again as they stepped inside the small, cramped room, and felt themselves shiver down to their bones. They did not like to think about the *Queequeg* springing a leak or collapsing, or to imagine themselves frantically attaching the diving helmets to their heads—or, in Sunny’s case, frantically stuffing herself inside. They did not like to think about where Count Olaf might be, or imagine what would happen if he found the sugar bowl before they did. But most of all, the Baudelaire orphans did not like to think about the dangers Fiona had mentioned—dangers worse than the ones they faced, or dangers they simply couldn’t imagine.

CHAPTER
Four



The expression “fits like a glove” is an odd one, because there are many different types of gloves and only a few of them are going to fit the situation you are in. If you need to keep your hands warm in a cold environment, then you’ll need a fitted pair of insulated gloves, and a glove made to fit in the bureau of a dollhouse will be of no help whatsoever. If you need to sneak into a restaurant in the middle of the night and steal a pair of chopsticks without being discovered, then you’ll need a sheer pair of gloves that leave no marks, and a glove decorated with loud bells simply will not do. And if you need to pass unnoticed in a shrubbery-covered landscape, then you’ll need a very, very large glove made of green and leafy fabric, and an elegant pair of silk gloves will be entirely useless.

Nevertheless, the expression “fits like a glove” simply means that something is very suitable, the way a custard is suitable for dessert, or a pair of chopsticks is a suitable tool to remove papers from an open briefcase, and when the Baudelaire orphans put on the uniforms of the *Queequeg* they found that they fitted the children like a glove, despite the fact that they did not actually fit that well. Violet was so pleased that the uniforms had several loops around the waist, just perfect for holding tools, that she didn’t care that her sleeves bagged at the elbows. Klaus was happy that there was a waterproof pocket for his commonplace book, and didn’t care that his boots were a bit too tight. And Sunny was reassured that the shiny material was sturdy enough to resist cooking spills as well as water, and didn’t mind rolling up the legs of the suit almost all the way so she could walk. But it was more than the individual features of the uniforms that felt fitting—it was the place and the people they represented. For a long time the Baudelaires had felt as if their lives were a damaged Frisbee, tossed from person to person and from place to place without ever really being appreciated or fitting in. But as they zipped up their uniforms and smoothed out the portraits of Herman Melville, the children felt as if the Frisbee of their lives just might be repaired. In wearing the uniform of the *Queequeg*, the siblings felt a part of something—not a family, exactly, but a gathering of people who had all volunteered for the same mission. To think that their skills in inventing, research, and cooking would be appreciated was something they had not thought in a long time, and as they stood in the supply room and regarded one another, this feeling fit them like a glove.

“Shall we go back to the Main Hall?” Violet asked. “I’m ready to take a look at the telegram device.”

“Let me just loosen the buckles on these boots,” Klaus said, “and I’ll be ready to tackle those tidal charts.”

“Cuisi—” Sunny said. By “Cuisi,” she meant something like, “I’m looking forward to examining the kitch—” but a loud scraping sound from overhead stopped the youngest Baudelaire from finishing her sentence. The entire submarine seemed to shake, and a few drops of water fell from the ceiling onto the Baudelaires’ heads.

“What was that?” Violet asked, picking up a diving helmet. “Do you think the *Queequeg* has sprung a leak?”

“I don’t know,” Klaus said, picking up one helmet for himself and another for Sunny. “Let’s go find out.”

The three Baudelaires hurried back down the corridor to the Main Hall as the horrid scraping sound continued. If you have ever heard the sound of fingernails against a chalkboard, then you know how unnerving a scraping sound can be, and to the children it sounded as if the largest fingernails in the world had mistaken the submarine for a piece of educational equipment.

“Captain Widdershins!” Violet cried over the scraping sound as the Baudelaires entered the hall. The captain was still at the top of the ladder, grasping the steering wheel in his gloved hand. “What’s going on?”

“This darned steering mechanism is a disgrace!” the captain cried in disgust. “Aye! The *Queequeg* just bumped against a rock formation on the side of the stream. If I hadn’t managed to get the sub back in control, the Submarine Q and Its Crew of Two would be sleeping with the fishes! Aye!”

“Perhaps I should examine the steering mechanism first,” Violet said, “and fix the telegram device later.”

“Don’t be ridiculous!” the captain said. “If we can’t receive any Volunteer Factual Dispatches, we might as well be wandering around with our eyes closed! We must find the sugar bowl before Count Olaf! Aye! Our personal safety isn’t nearly as important! Now hurry up! Aye! Get a move on! Aye! Get cracking! Aye! Get a glass of water if you’re thirsty! Aye! He or she who hesitates is lost!”

Violet didn’t bother to point out that finding the sugar bowl would be impossible if the submarine was destroyed, and she knew better than to argue with the captain’s personal philosophy. “It’s worth a try,” she said, and walked over to the small wheeled platform. “Do you mind if I use this?” she asked Fiona. “It’ll help me get a good look at the device’s machinery.”

“Be my guest,” Fiona said. “Klaus, let’s get to work on the tidal charts. We can study them at the table, and keep an eye out for glimpses of the sugar bowl through the porthole. I don’t think we’ll see it, but it’s worth taking a look.”

“Fiona,” Violet said hesitantly, “could you also take a look for our friend, Quigley Quagmire? He was carried away by the stream’s other tributary, and we haven’t seen him since.”

“Quigley Quagmire?” Fiona asked. “The cartographer?”

“He’s a friend of ours,” Klaus said. “Do you know him?”

“Only by reputation,” Fiona said, using a phrase which here means “I don’t know him personally but I’ve heard of the work he does.” “The volunteers lost track of him a long time ago, along with Hector and the other Quagmire triplets.”

“The Quagmires haven’t been as lucky as we have,” Violet said, tying her hair up in a ribbon to help her focus on repairing the telegram device. “I’m hoping you’ll spot him with the periscope.”

“It’s worth a try,” Fiona said, as Phil walked through the kitchen doors, wearing an apron over his uniform.

“Sunny?” he asked. “I heard you were going to help me in the kitchen. We’re a bit low on supplies, I’m afraid. Using the *Queequeg* nets I managed to catch a few cod, and we have half a sack of potatoes, but not much else. Do you have any ideas about what to make for dinner?”

“Chowda?” Sunny asked.

“It’s worth a try,” Phil said, and for the next few hours, all three Baudelaires tried to see if their tasks were worth a try. Violet wheeled herself underneath several pipes to get a good look at the telegram device, and frowned as she twisted wires and tightened a few screws with a screwdriver she found lying around. Klaus sat at the table and looked over the tidal charts, using a pencil to trace possible paths the sugar bowl might have taken as the water cycle sent it tumbling down the Stricken Stream. And Sunny worked with Phil, standing on a large soup pot so she could reach the counter of the small, grimy kitchen, boiling potatoes and picking tiny bones out of the cod. And as the afternoon turned to evening, and the waters of the Stricken Stream grew even darker in the porthole, the Main Hall of the *Queequeg* was quiet as all the volunteers worked on the tasks at hand. But even when Captain Widdershins climbed down from the ladder, retrieved a small bell from a pocket of his uniform, and filled the room with the echoes of its loud, metallic ring, the Baudelaires could not be certain if all their efforts had been worth a try at all.

“Attention!” the captain said. “Aye! I want the entire crew of the *Queequeg* to report on their progress! Gather ’round the table and tell me what’s going on!”

Violet wheeled herself out from under the telegram device, and joined her brother and Fiona at the table, while Sunny and Phil emerged from the kitchen.

“I’ll report first!” the captain said. “Aye! Because I’m the captain! Not because I’m showing off! Aye! I try not to show off very much! Aye! Because it’s rude! Aye! I’ve managed to steer us further down the Stricken Stream without bumping into anything else! Aye! Which is much harder than it sounds! Aye! We’ve reached the sea! Aye! Now it should be easier not to run into anything! Aye! Violet, what about you?”

“Well, I thoroughly examined the telegram device,” Violet said. “I made a few minor repairs, but I found nothing that would interfere with receiving a telegram.”

“You’re saying that the device isn’t broken, aye?” the captain demanded.

“Aye,” Violet said, growing more comfortable with the captain’s speech. “I think there must be a problem at the other end.”

“Procto?” Sunny asked, which meant “The other end?”

“A telegram requires two devices,” Violet said. “One to send the message and the other to receive it. I think you haven’t been receiving Volunteer Factual Dispatches because whoever sends the messages is having a problem with their machine.”

“But all sorts of volunteers send us messages,” Fiona said.

“Aye!” the captain said. “We’ve received dispatches from more than twenty-five agents!”

“Then many machines must be damaged,” Violet replied.

“Sabotage,” Klaus said.

“It does sound like the damage has been done on purpose,” Violet agreed. “Remember when we sent a telegram to Mr. Poe, from the Last Chance General Store?”

“Silencio,” Sunny said, which meant “We never heard a reply.”

“They’re closing in,” the captain said darkly. “Our enemies are preventing us from communicating.”

“I don’t see how Count Olaf would have time to destroy all those machines,” Klaus said.

“Many telegrams travel through telephone lines,” Fiona said. “It wouldn’t be difficult.”

“Besides, Olaf isn’t the only enemy,” Violet said, thinking of two other villains the Baudelaires had encountered on Mount Fraught.

“Aye!” the captain said. “That’s for certain. There is evil out there you cannot even imagine. Klaus, have you made any progress on the tidal charts?”

Klaus spread out a chart on the table so everyone could see. The chart was really more of a map, showing the Stricken Stream winding through the mountains before reaching the sea, with tiny arrows and notations describing the way the water was moving. The arrows and notes were in several different colors of ink, as if the chart had been passed from researcher to researcher, each adding notes as he or she discovered more information about the area. “It’s more complicated than I thought,” the middle Baudelaire said, “and much more dull. These charts note every single detail concerning the water cycle.”

“Dull?” the captain roared. “Aye? We’re in the middle of a desperate mission and all you can think of is your own entertainment? Aye? Do you want us to *hesitate*? Stop our activities and put on a puppet show just so you won’t find this submarine *dull*?”

“You misunderstood me,” Klaus said quickly. “All I meant was that it’s easier to research something that’s interesting.”

“You sound like Fiona,” the captain said. “When I want her to research the life of Herman Melville, she works slowly, but she’s quick as a whip when the subject is mushrooms.”

“Mushrooms?” Klaus asked. “Are you a mycologist?”

Fiona smiled, and her eyes grew wide behind her triangular glasses. “I never thought I’d meet someone who knew that word,” she said. “Besides me. Yes, I’m a mycologist. I’ve been interested in fungi all my life. If we have time, I’ll show you my mycological library.”

“Time?” Captain Widdershins repeated. “We don’t have time for fungus books! Aye! We don’t have time for you two to do all that flirting, either!”

“We’re not *flirting*!” Fiona said. “We’re having a conversation.”

“It looked like flirting to me,” the captain said. “Aye!”

“Why don’t you tell us about your research,” Violet said to Klaus, knowing that her brother would rather talk about the tidal charts than his personal life. Klaus gave her a grateful smile and pointed to a point on the chart.

“If my calculations are correct,” he said, “the sugar bowl would have been carried down the same tributary we went down in the toboggan. The prevailing currents of the stream lead all the way down here, where the sea begins.”

“So it was carried out to sea,” Violet said.

“I think so,” Klaus said. “And we can see here that the tides would move it away from Sontag Shore in a northeasterly direction.”

“Sink?” Sunny asked, which meant something like, “Wouldn’t the sugar bowl just drift to the ocean floor?”

“It’s too small,” Klaus said. “Oceans are in constant motion, and an object that falls into the sea could end up miles away. It appears that the tides and currents in this part of the ocean would take the sugar bowl past the Gulag Archipelago here, and then head down toward the Mediocre Barrier Reef before turning at this point here, which is marked ‘A.A.’ Do you know what that is, Captain? It looks like some sort of floating structure.”

The captain sighed, and raised one finger to fiddle with the curl of his mustache. “Aye,” he said sadly. “Anwhistle Aquatics. It’s a marine research center and a rhetorical advice service—or it *was*. It burned down.”

“Anwhistle?” Violet asked. “That was Aunt Josephine’s last name.”

“Aye,” the captain said. “Anwhistle Aquatics was founded by Gregor Anwhistle, the famous ichnologist and Josephine’s brother-in-law. But all that’s ancient history. Where did the sugar bowl go next?”

The Baudelaires would have preferred to learn more, but knew better than to argue with the captain, and Klaus pointed to a small oval on the chart to continue his report. “This is the part that confuses me,” he said. “You see this oval, right next to Anwhistle Aquatics? It’s marked ‘G.G.,’ but there’s no other explanation.”

“G.G.?” Captain Widdershins said, and stroked his mustache thoughtfully. “I’ve never seen an oval like that on a chart like this.”

“There’s something else confusing about it,” Klaus said, peering at the oval. There are two different arrows inside it, and each one points in a different direction.”

“It looks like the tide is going two ways at once,” Fiona said.

Violet frowned. “That doesn’t make any sense,” she said.

“I’m confused, too,” Klaus said. “According to my calculations, the sugar bowl was probably carried right to this place on the map. But where it went from there I can’t imagine.”

“I guess we should set a course for G.G., whatever it might be,” Violet said, “and see what we can find when we get there.”

“I’m the captain!” the captain cried. “I’ll give the orders around here! Aye! And I order that we set a course for that oval, and see what we can find when we get there! But first I’m hungry! And thirsty! Aye! And my arm itches! I can scratch my own arm, but Cookie and Sunny, you are responsible for food and drink! Aye!”

“Sunny helped me make a chowder that should be ready in a few minutes,” Phil said. “Her teeth were very handy in dicing the boiled potatoes.”

“Flosh,” Sunny said, which meant “Don’t worry—I cleaned my teeth before using them as kitchen implements.”

“Chowder? Aye! Chowder sounds delicious!” the captain cried. “And what about dessert? Aye? Dessert is the most important meal of the day! Aye! In my opinion! Even though it’s not really a meal! Aye!”

“Tonight, the only dessert we have is gum,” Phil said. “I still have some left from my days at the lumbermill.”

“I think I’ll pass on dessert,” Klaus said, who’d had such a terrible time at Lucky Smells Lumbermill that he no longer had a taste for gum.

“Yomhuledet,” Sunny said. She meant “Don’t worry—Phil and I have arranged a surprise dessert for tomorrow night,” but of course only her siblings could understand the youngest Baudelaire’s unusual way of talking. Nevertheless, as soon as Sunny spoke, Captain Widdershins stood up from the table and began crying out in astonishment.

“Aye!” he cried. “Dear God! Holy Buddha! Charles Darwin! Duke Ellington! Aye! Fiona— turn off the engines! Aye! Cookie—turn off the stove! Aye! Violet—make sure the telegram device is off! Aye! Klaus! Gather your materials together so nothing rolls around! Aye! Calm down! Work quickly! Don’t panic! Help! Aye!”

“What’s going on?” Phil asked.

“What is it, stepfather?” Fiona asked.

For once, the captain was silent, and merely pointed at a screen on the submarine wall. The screen looked like a piece of graph paper, lit up in green light, with a glowing letter Q in the center.

“That looks like a sonar detector,” Violet said.

“It *is* a sonar detector,” Fiona said. “We can tell if any other undersea craft are approaching us by detecting the sounds they make. The Q represents the *Queequeg* and—”

The mycologist gasped, and the Baudelaires looked at where she was pointing. At the very top of the panel was another glowing symbol, which was moving down the screen at a fast clip, a phrase which here means “straight toward the *Queequeg.*” Fiona did not say what this green symbol stood for, and the children could not bear to ask. It was an eye, staring at the frightened volunteers and wiggling its long, skinny eyelashes, which protruded from every side.

“Olaf!” Sunny said in a whisper.

“There’s no way of knowing for sure,” Fiona said, “but we’d better follow my stepfather’s orders. If it’s another submarine, then it has a sonar detector too. If the *Queequeg* is absolutely silent, they’ll have no idea we’re here.”

“Aye!” the captain said. “Hurry! He who hesitates is lost!”

Nobody bothered to add “Or she” to the captain’s personal philosophy, but instead hurried to silence the submarine. Fiona climbed up the rope ladder and turned off the whirring engine. Violet wheeled back into the machinery of the telegram device and turned it off. Phil and Sunny ran into the kitchen to turn off the stove, so even the bubbling of their homemade chowder would not give the *Queequeg* away. And Klaus and the captain gathered up the materials on the table so that nothing would make even the slightest rattle. Within moments the submarine was silent as the grave, and all the volunteers stood mutely at the table, looking out the porthole into the gloomy water of the sea. As the eye on the sonar screen drew closer to the Q, they could see something emerge from the darkened waters—a strange shape that became clearer as it got closer and closer to the *Queequeg.* It was, indeed, another submarine, the likes of which the Baudelaires had never seen before, even in the strangest of books. It was much, much bigger than the *Queequeg,* and as it approached, the children had to cover their mouths so their gasps could not be heard.

The second submarine was in the shape of a giant octopus, with an enormous metal dome for a head and two wide portholes for eyes. A real octopus, of course, has eight legs, but this submarine had many more. What had appeared to be eyelashes on the sonar screen were really small metal tubes, protruding from the body of the octopus and circling in the water, making thousands of bubbles that hurried toward the surface as if they were frightened of the underwater craft. The octopus drew closer, and all six passengers on the *Queequeg* stood as still as statues, hoping the submarine had not discovered them. The strange craft was so close the Baudelaires could see a shadowy figure inside one of the octopus's eyes—a tall, lean figure, and although the children could not see any further details, they were positive the figure had one eyebrow instead of two, filthy fingernails instead of good grooming habits, and a tattoo of an eye on its left ankle.

"Count Olaf," Sunny whispered, before she could stop herself. The figure in the porthole twitched, as if Sunny's tiny noise had caused the *Queequeg* to be detected. Spouting more bubbles, the octopus drew closer still, and any moment it seemed that one of the legs of the octopus would be heard scraping against the outside of the *Queequeg.* The three children looked down at their helmets, which they had left on the floor, and wondered if they should put them on, so they might survive if the submarine collapsed. Fiona grabbed her stepfather's arm, but Captain Widdershins shook his head silently, and pointed at the sonar screen again. The eye and the Q were almost on top of one another on the screen, but that was not what the captain was pointing at.

There was a third shape of glowing green light, this one the biggest of all, a huge curved tube with a small circle at the end of it, slithering toward the center of the screen like a snake. But this third underwater craft didn't look like a snake. As it approached the eye and the Q, the small circle leading the enormous curved tube toward the *Queequeg* and its frightened volunteer crew, the shape looked more like a question mark. The Baudelaires stared at this new, third shape approaching them in eerie silence, and felt as if they were about to be consumed by the very questions they were trying to answer.

Captain Widdershins pointed at the porthole again, and the children watched the octopus stop, as if it too had detected this strange third shape. Then the legs of the octopus began whirring even more furiously, and the strange submarine began to recede from view, a phrase which here means "disappear from the porthole as it hurried away from the *Queequeg*." The Baudelaires looked at the sonar screen, and watched the question mark follow the glowing green eye in silence until both shapes disappeared from the sonar detector and the *Queequeg* was alone. The six passengers waited a moment and then sighed with relief.

"It's gone," Violet said. "Count Olaf didn't find us."

"I knew we'd be safe," Phil said, optimistic as usual. "Olaf is probably in a good mood anyway."

The Baudelaires did not bother to say that their enemy was only in a good mood when one of his treacherous plans was succeeding, or when the enormous fortune, left behind by the Baudelaire parents, appeared to be falling into his grubby hands.

"What was that, Stepfather?" Fiona said. "Why did he leave?"

"What was that third shape?" Violet asked.

The captain shook his head again. "Something very bad," he said. "Even worse than Olaf, probably. I told you Baudelaires that there is evil you cannot even imagine."

“We don’t have to imagine it,” Klaus said. “We saw it there on the screen.”

“That screen is nothing,” the captain said. “It’s just a piece of equipment, aye? There was a philosopher who said that all of life is just shadows. He said that people were just sitting in a cave, watching shadows on the cave wall. Aye—shadows of something much bigger and grander than themselves. Well, that sonar detector is like our cave wall, showing us the shape of things much more powerful and terrifying.”

“I don’t understand,” Fiona said.

“I don’t want you to understand,” the captain said, putting his arm around her. “That’s why I haven’t told you why the sugar bowl is so very crucial. There are secrets in this world too terrible for young people to know, even as those secrets get closer and closer. Aye! In any case, I’m hungry. Aye! Shall we eat?”

The captain rang his bell again, and the Baudelaires felt as if they had awoken from a deep sleep. “I’ll serve the chowder,” Phil said. “Come on, Sunny, why don’t you help me?”

“I’ll turn the engines back on,” Fiona said, and began climbing the rope ladder. “Violet, there’s a drawer in the table full of silverware. Perhaps you and your brother could set the table.”

“Of course,” Violet said, but then frowned as she turned to her brother. The middle Baudelaire was staring at the tidal chart with a look of utter concentration. His eyes were so bright behind his glasses that they looked a bit like the glowing symbols on the sonar detector. “Klaus?” she said.

Klaus didn’t answer his sister, but turned his gaze from the chart to Captain Widdershins. “I may not know why the sugar bowl’s important,” he said, “but I’ve just figured out where it is.”

CHAPTER
Five

When you are invited to dine, particularly with people you do not know very well, it always helps to have a conversational opener, a phrase which here means “an interesting sentence to say out loud in order to get people talking.” Although lately it has become more and more difficult to attend dinner parties without the evening ending in gunfire or tapioca, I keep a list of good and bad conversational openers in my commonplace book in order to avoid awkward pauses at the dinner table. “Who would like to see an assortment of photographs taken while I was on vacation?” for instance, is a very poor conversational opener, because it is likely to make your fellow diners shudder instead of talk, whereas good conversational openers are sentences such as “What would drive a man to commit arson?,” “Why do so many stories of true love end in tragedy and despair?,” and “Madame diLustro, I believe I’ve discovered your true identity!,” all of which are likely to provoke discussions, arguments, and accusations, thus making the dinner party much more entertaining. When Klaus Baudelaire announced that he’d discovered the location of the sugar bowl, it was one of the best conversational openers in the history of dinner gatherings, because everyone aboard the *Queequeg* began talking at once, and dinner had not even been served.

“Aye?” Captain Widdershins shouted. “You’ve figured out where the tide took it? Aye? But you just said you didn’t know! Aye! You said you were confused by the tidal charts, and that oval marked ‘G.G.’! Aye! And yet you’ve figured it out! Aye! You’re a genius! Aye! You’re a smarty-pants! Aye! You’re a bookworm! Aye! You’re brilliant! Aye! You’re sensational! Aye! If you find me the sugar bowl, I’ll allow you to marry Fiona!”

“Stepfather!” Fiona cried, blushing behind her triangular glasses.

“Don’t worry,” the captain replied, “we’ll find a husband for Violet, too! Aye! Perhaps we’ll find your long-lost brother, Fiona! He’s much older, of course, and he’s been missing for years, but if Klaus can locate the sugar bowl he could probably find him! Aye! He’s a charming man, so you’d probably fall in love with him, Violet, and then we could have a double wedding! Aye! Right here in the Main Hall of the *Queequeg*! Aye! I would be happy to officiate! Aye! I have a bow tie I’ve been saving for a special occasion!”

“Captain Widdershins,” Violet said, “let’s try to stick to the subject of the sugar bowl.” She did not add that she was not interested in getting married for quite some time, particularly after Count Olaf had tried to marry her in one of his early schemes.

“Aye!” the captain cried. “Of course! Naturally! Aye! Tell us everything, Klaus! We’ll eat while you talk! Aye! Sunny! Cookie! Serve the chowder!”

“Chowder is served!” announced Phil, as he hurried from the kitchen carrying two steaming bowls of thick soup. The youngest Baudelaire trailed behind him. Sunny was still a bit too young to carry hot food by herself, but she had found a pepper grinder, and circled the table offering fresh ground pepper to anyone who wanted some.

“Double pepper for me, Sunny!” Captain Widdershins cried, snatching the first bowl of chowder, although it is more polite to let one’s guests be served first. “A nice hot bowl of chowder! A double helping of pepper! The location of the sugar bowl! Aye! That’ll blow the barnacles off me! Aye! I’m so glad I scooped you Baudelaires out of the stream!”

“I’m glad, too,” Fiona said, smiling shyly at Klaus.

“I couldn’t be happier about it,” Phil said, serving two more bowls of chowder. “I thought I’d never see you Baudelaires again, and here you are! All three of you have grown up so nicely, even though you’ve been constantly pursued by an evil villain and falsely accused of numerous crimes!”

“You certainly have had a harrowing journey,” Fiona said, using a word which here means “frantic and extremely distressing.”

“I’m afraid we may have another harrowing journey ahead of us,” Klaus said. “When Captain Widdershins was talking about the philosopher who said that all of life is just shadows in a cave, I realized at once what that oval must be.”

“A philosopher?” the captain asked. “That’s impossible! Aye!”

“Absurdio,” Sunny said, which meant “Philosophers live at the tops of mountains or in ivory towers, not underneath the sea.”

“I think Klaus means a cave,” Violet said quickly, rather than translating. “The oval must mark the entrance to a cave.”

“It begins right near Anwhistle Aquatics,” Klaus said, pointing to the chart. “The currents of the ocean would have brought the sugar bowl right to the entrance, and then the currents of the cave would have carried it far inside.”

“But the chart only shows the entrance to the cave,” Violet said. “We don’t know what it’s like inside. I wish Quigley was here. With his knowledge of maps, he might know the path of the cave.”

“But Quigley isn’t here,” Klaus said gently. “I guess we’ll be traveling in uncharted waters.”

“That’ll be fun,” Phil said.

The Baudelaires looked at one another. The phrase “uncharted waters” does not only refer to underground locations that do not appear on charts. It is a phrase that can describe any place that is unknown, such as a forest in which every explorer has been lost, or one’s own future, which cannot be known until it arrives. You don’t have to be an optimist, like Phil, to find uncharted waters fun. I myself have spent many an enjoyable afternoon exploring the uncharted waters of a book I have not read, or a hiding place I discovered in a sideboard, a word which here means “a piece of furniture in the dining room, with shelves and drawers to hold various useful items.” But the Baudelaires had already spent a great deal of time exploring uncharted waters, from the uncharted waters of Lake Lachrymose and its terrifying creatures, to the uncharted waters of secrets found in the Library of Records at Heimlich Hospital, to the uncharted waters of Count Olaf’s wickedness, which were deeper and darker than any waters of the sea. After all of their uncharted traveling, the Baudelaire orphans were not in the mood to explore any uncharted waters, and could not share Phil’s optimistic enthusiasm.

“It won’t be the first time the *Queequeg*’s been in uncharted waters,” Captain Widdershins said. “Aye—most of this sea was first explored by V.F.D. submarines.”

“We thought V.F.D. stood for Volunteer Fire Department,” Violet said. “Why would a fire department spend so much time underwater?”

“V.F.D. isn’t just a fire department,” the captain said, but his voice was very quiet, as if he were talking more to himself than to his crew. “Aye—it started that way. But the volunteers were interested in every such thing! I was one of the first to sign up for Voluntary Fish Domestication. That was one of the missions of Anwhistle Aquatics. Aye! I spent four long years training salmon to swim upstream and search for forest fires. That was when you were very young,Fiona, but your brother worked right alongside me. You should have seen him sneaking extra worms to his favorites! Aye!

The program was a modest success! Aye! But then Café Salmonella came along, and took our entire fleet away. The Snicket siblings fought as best they could. Aye! Historians call it the Snicket Snickersnee! Aye! But as the poet wrote, ‘Too many waiters turn out to be traitors.’”

“The Snicket siblings?” Klaus was quick to ask.

“Aye,” the captain said. “Three of them, each as noble as the next. Aye! Kit Snicket helped build this submarine! Aye! Jacques Snicket proved that the Royal Gardens Fire was arson! Aye! And the third sibling, with the marmosets—”

“You Baudelaires knew Jacques Snicket, didn’t you?” asked Fiona, who wasn’t shy about interrupting her stepfather.

“Very briefly,” Violet said, “and we recently found a message addressed to him. That’s how we found about Thursday’s gathering, at the last safe place.”

“Nobody would write a message to Jacques,” Captain Widdershins said. “Aye! Jacques is dead!”

“Etartsigam!” Sunny said, and her siblings quickly explained that she meant “The initials were J.S.”

“It must be some other J.S.,” Fiona said.

“Speaking of mysterious initials,” Klaus said, “I wonder what G.G. stands for. If we knew what the cave was called, we might have a better idea of our journey.”

“Aye!” Captain Widdershins said. “Let’s guess! Great Glen! Aye! Green Glade! Aye! Glamorous Glacier! Aye! Gleeful Gameroom! Aye! Glass Goulash! Aye! Gothic Government! Aye! Grandma’s Gingivitis! Aye! Girl Getting-up-from-table! Aye!”

Indeed, the captain’s stepdaughter had stood up, wiped her mouth with a napkin embroidered with a portrait of Herman Melville, and walked over to a sideboard tucked into a far corner. Fiona opened a cabinet and revealed a few shelves stuffed with books. “Yesterday I started reading a new addition to my mycological library,” she said, standing on tiptoes to reach the shelf. “I just remembered reading something that might come in handy.”

The captain fingered his mustache in astonishment. “You and your mushrooms and molds!” the captain said. “I thought I’d never live to see your mycological studies be put to good use,” and I’m sorry to say he was right.

“Let’s see,” Fiona said, paging through a thick book entitled *Mushroom Minutiae*, a word which here means “obscure facts.” “It was in the table of contents—that’s all I’ve read so far. It was about halfway through.” She brought the book over to the table, and ran a finger down the table of contents while the Baudelaires leaned over to see. “Chapter Thirty-Six, The Yeast of Beasts. Chapter Thirty-Seven, Morel Behavior in a Free Society. Chapter Thirty-Eight, Fungible Mold, Moldable Fungi. Chapter Thirty-Nine, Visitable Fungal Ditches. Chapter Forty, The Gorgonian Grotto—there!”

“Grotto?” Sunny asked.

“‘Grotto’ is another word for ‘cave,’” Klaus explained, as Fiona flipped ahead to Chapter Forty.

“‘The Gorgonian Grotto,’” she read, “‘located in propinquity to Anwhistle Aquatics, has appropriately wraithlike nomenclature, with roots in Grecian mythology, as this conical cavern is fecund with what is perhaps the bugaboo of the entire mycological pantheon.’”

“Aye! I told you that book was too difficult!” Captain Widdershins said. “A young child can’t unlock that sort of vocabulary.”

“It’s a very complicated prose style,” Klaus admitted, “but I think I know what it says. The Gorgonian Grotto was named after something in Greek mythology.”

“A Gorgon,” Violet said. “Like that woman with snakes instead of hair.”

“She could turn people into stone,” Fiona said.

“She was probably nice, when you got to know her,” Phil said.

“Aye! I think I went to school with such a woman!” the captain said.

“I don’t think she was a real person,” Klaus said. “I think she was legendary. The book says it’s appropriate that the grotto is named after a legendary monster, because there’s a sort of monster living in a cave—a bugaboo.”

“Bugaboo?” Sunny asked.

“A bugaboo can be any kind of monster,” Klaus said. “We could call Count Olaf a bugaboo, if we felt so inclined.”

“I’d rather not speak of him at all,” Violet said.

“This bugaboo is a fungus of some sort,” Fiona said, and continued reading from *Mushroom Minutiae.* “‘The Medusoid Mycelium has a unique conducive strategy of waxing and waning: first a brief dormant cycle, in which the mycelium is nearly invisible, and then a precipitated flowering into speckled stalks and caps of such intense venom that it is fortunate the grotto serves as quarantine.’”

“I didn’t understand all of that scientific terminology,” Klaus said.

“I did,” Fiona said. “There are three main parts to a mushroom. One is the cap, which is shaped like an umbrella, and the second is the stalk, which holds the umbrella up. Those are the parts you can see.”

“There’s part of a mushroom you can’t see?” Violet asked.

“It’s called the mycelium,” Fiona replied. “It’s like a bunch of thread, branching out underneath the ground. Some mushrooms have mycelia that go on for miles.”

“How do you spell ‘mycelium’?” Klaus asked, reaching into his waterproof pocket. “I want to write this down in my commonplace book.”

Fiona pointed the word out on the page. “The Medusoid Mycelium waxes and wanes,” she said, “which means that the caps and stalks spring up from the mycelium, and then wither away, and then spring up again. It sounds like you wouldn’t know the mushrooms are there until they poke up out of the ground.”

The Baudelaires pictured a group of mushrooms suddenly springing up under their feet, and felt a bit queasy, as if they already knew of the dreadful encounter they would soon have with this terrible fungus. “That sounds unnerving,” Violet said.

“It gets worse,” Fiona said. “The mushrooms are exceedingly poisonous. Listen to this: ‘As the poet says, *“A single spore has such grim power/That you may die within the hour.”’* A spore is like a seed—if it has a place to grow, it will become another mycelium. But if someone eats it, or even breathes it in, it can cause death.”

“Within the hour?” Klaus said. “That’s a fast-acting poison.”

“Most fungal poisons have cures,” Fiona said. “The poison of a deadly fungus can be the source of some wonderful medicines. I’ve been working on a few myself. But this book says it’s lucky the grotto acts as quarantine.”

“Quarwa?” Sunny asked.

“Quarantine is when something dangerous is isolated, so the danger cannot spread,” Klaus explained. “Because the Medusoid Mycelium is in uncharted waters, very few people have been poisoned. If someone brought even one spore to dry land, who knows what would happen?”

“We won’t find out!” Captain Widdershins said. “We’re not going to take any spores! Aye! We’re just going to grab the sugar bowl and be on our way! Aye! I’ll set a course right now!”

The captain bounded up from the table and began climbing the rope ladder to the *Queequeg*’s controls. “Are you sure we should continue our mission?” Fiona asked her stepfather, shutting the book. “It sounds very dangerous.”

"Dangerous? Aye! Dangerous and scary! Aye! Scary and difficult! Aye! Difficult and mysterious! Aye! Mysterious and uncomfortable! Aye! Uncomfortable and risky! Aye! Risky and noble! Aye!"

"I suppose the fungus can't hurt us if we're inside the submarine," Phil said, struggling to remain optimistic.

"Even if it could!" the captain cried, standing at the top of the rope ladder and gesturing dramatically as he delivered an impassioned oratory, a phrase which here means "emotional speech that the Baudelaires found utterly convincing, even if they did not quite agree with every word." "The amount of treachery in this world is enormous!" he cried. "Aye! Think of the crafts we saw on the sonar screen! Think of Count Olaf's enormous submarine, and the even more enormous one that chased it away! Aye! There's always something more enormous and more terrifying on our tails! Aye! And so many of the noble submarines are gone! Aye! You think the Herman Melville suits are the only noble uniforms in the world? There used to be volunteers with P. G. Wodehouse on their uniforms, and Carl Van Vechten. There was Comyns and Cleary and Archy and Mehitabel. But now volunteers are scarce! So the best we can do is one small noble thing! Aye! Like retrieving the sugar bowl from the Gorgonian Grotto, no matter how grim it sounds! Aye! Remember my personal philosophy! He who hesitates is lost!"

"Or she!" Fiona said.

"Or she," the captain agreed. "Aye?"

"Aye!" Violet cried.

"Aye!" Klaus shouted.

"Aye!" Sunny shrieked.

"Hooray!" Phil yelled.

Captain Widdershins peered down in annoyance at Phil, whom he would have preferred say "Aye!" along with everyone else. "Cookie!" he ordered. “Do the dishes! The rest of you get some shut-eye! Aye!”

“Shut-eye?” Violet asked.

“Aye! It means ‘sleep’!” the captain explained.

“We know what it means,” Klaus said. “We’re just surprised that we’re supposed to sleep through the mission.”

“It’ll take some time to get to the cave!” the captain said. “I want you four to be well-rested in case you’re needed! Now go to your barracks! Aye!”

It is one of life’s bitterest truths that bedtime so often arrives just when things are really getting interesting. The Baudelaires were not particularly in the mood to toss and turn in the *Queequeg*’s barracks—a word which here means “a type of bedroom that is usually uncomfortable”—as the submarine drew closer and closer to the mysterious grotto and its indispensible item, a phrase which here means “the sugar bowl, although the children did not know why it was so important.” But as they followed Fiona out of the Main Hall and back down the corridor, past the plaque advertising the captain’s personal philosophy, the door to the supply room, and an uncountable number of leaky metal pipes, the siblings felt quite tired, and by the time Fiona opened a door to reveal a small, green-lit room stacked with saggy bunk beds, the three children were already yawning. Perhaps it was because of their long, exhausting day, which had begun on the icy summit of Mount Fraught, but Violet didn’t ponder one single mechanical idea as she got into bed, as she usually did before she went to sleep. Klaus scarcely had time to put his glasses on a small bedside table before he nodded off, a phrase which here means “fell asleep without considering even one of the books he had recently read.” Sunny curled up on a pillow, and she didn’t waste one moment dreaming up new recipes—preferably entrées that were less mushy than chowder, as she still enjoyed biting things as much as she did when she was a baby—before she was dreaming herself. And even Fiona, whose bedtime habits are less familiar to me than that of the Baudelaires’, put her glasses next to Klaus’s and was asleep in moments. The whirring engine of the *Queequeg* sent them deeper and deeper into slumber for several hours, and they probably would have slept much longer if the children hadn't been awakened by a terrible—and terribly familiar—noise. It was a loud, unnerving scraping, like fingernails against a chalkboard, and the Baudelaires were almost shaken out of bed as the entire submarine rattled.

"What was that?" Violet asked.

"We hit something," Fiona said grimly, grabbing her glasses in one hand and her diving helmet in the other. "We'd better see what the situation is."

The Baudelaires nodded in agreement, and hurried out of the barracks and back down the corridor. There was an unnerving splashing sound coming from a few of the tubes, and Klaus had to pick up Sunny to carry her over several large puddles.

"Is the submarine collapsing?" Klaus asked.

"We'll know soon enough," Fiona said, and she was correct. In moments she'd led the Baudelaires back into the Main Hall, where Phil and the captain were standing at the table, staring out the porthole into black nothingness. They each had grim expressions on their faces, although Phil was trying to smile at the same time.

"It's good you got some rest," the optimist said. "There's a real adventure ahead of you."

"I'm glad you brought your diving helmets," Captain Widdershins said. "Aye!"

"Why?" Violet asked. "Is the *Queequeg* seriously damaged?"

"Aye!" the captain said. "I mean, no. The submarine is damaged, but she'll hold—for now. We reached the Gorgonian Grotto about an hour ago, and I was able to steer us inside with no problem. But the cave got narrower and narrower as we maneuvered further and further inside."

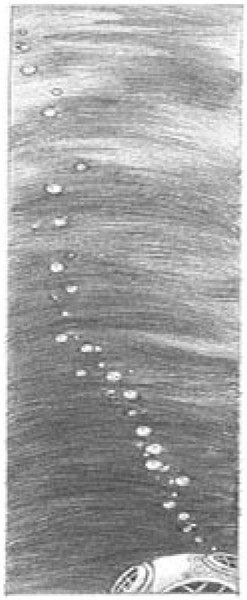
"The book said the grotto was conical," Klaus said. "That means it's shaped like a cone."

“Aye!” the captain said. “The entrance was the wide end of the cone, but now it’s too narrow for the submarine to travel. If we want to retrieve the sugar bowl we’ll have to use something smaller.”

“Periscope?” Sunny asked.

“No,” Captain Widdershins replied. “A child.”

CHAPTER
Six



"*You* youngsters look very spiffy in those helmets!" Phil said, with a wide, optimistic smile on his face. "I know you must be a little nervous, but I'm sure all of you children will rise to the occasion!"

The Baudelaire orphans sighed, and looked at one another from inside their diving helmets. When someone tells you that you will rise to the occasion, it means they think you'll be strong or skillful enough for a particular situation, but Violet, Klaus, and Sunny did not know if they could rise to the occasion when they were so afraid of sinking. Although they had dragged their helmets back and forth to the barracks, they hadn't realized how awkward they were until they had strapped them onto their waterproof uniforms. Violet did not like the fact that she couldn't reach through the helmet to tie up her hair, in case she needed to invent something on the spur of the moment, a phrase which here means "while traveling through the Gorgonian Grotto." Klaus found that it was difficult to see, as the small circular window in his helmet interfered with his glasses. And Sunny was not at all happy about curling up inside her helmet, shutting the tiny door, and being carried by her sister as if she were a volleyball instead of a young girl. When they had put their uniforms on just a few hours earlier, the three siblings thought that the waterproof suits had fit them like a glove. But now, as they followed Captain Widdershins out of the Main Hall and down the damp and dripping corridor, the children feared that the uniforms fit more like an anchor, dragging them down to the depths of the sea.

“Don’t worry,” Fiona said, as though she were reading the Baudelaires’ minds. She gave the siblings a small smile from behind her diving helmet. “I assure you that these suits are completely safe—safe, but uncomfortable.”

“As long as we can breathe,” Violet said, “I don’t care how uncomfortable they are.”

“Of course you’ll be able to breathe!” the captain said. “Aye! The oxygen systems in your helmets provide plenty of air for a short journey! Of course, if there’s any opportunity to remove your helmets, you should do so! Aye! That way the system can recharge itself, and you’ll have more air.”

“Where would we find an opportunity to remove our helmets in an underwater cave?” Klaus asked.

“Who knows?” Captain Widdershins said. “Aye! You’ll be in uncharted waters. I wish I could go myself! Aye! But the grotto has become too narrow!”

“Hewenkella,” Sunny said. Her voice was muffled inside the helmet, and it was difficult for even her siblings to know what she was saying.

“I think my sister is curious about how we’ll be able to see our way,” Violet said. “Does the *Queequeg* have any waterproof flashlights?”

“Flashlights won’t help you,” the captain replied. “Aye! It’s too dark! Aye! But you won’t need to see your way. Aye! If Klaus’s calculations are correct, the tide will just push you along. Aye! You won’t even have to swim! You can just sit there, and you’ll drift right to the sugar bowl!”

“That seems like an awfully passive way to travel,” Fiona said.

“Aye!” her stepfather agreed. “It does! But there is no other solution! And we should not hesitate!” He stopped and pointed to his plaque. “He or she who hesitates is lost!” he reminded them.

“It’s a little hard not to hesitate,” Violet said, “before doing something like this.”

“It’s not too late to draw straws!” the captain said. “Aye! You don’t all have to go together!”

“The three of us prefer not to be separated,” Klaus said. “We’ve had too much trouble that way.”

“I should think you’ve had too much trouble in any case!” the captain said. “Aye!”

“The Baudelaires are right, Stepfather,” Fiona said. “This way makes the most sense. We may need Violet’s mechanical expertise, or Klaus’s knowledge of the tidal charts. And Sunny’s size may come in handy, if the grotto gets even smaller.”

“Ulp,” Sunny said, which meant something like, “I don’t like the idea of drifting by myself in a diving helmet.”

“What about you, Fiona?” the captain asked. “Aye! You could stay here with me!”

“My skills might be needed as well,” Fiona said quietly, and the Baudelaires shuddered, trying not to think about the Medusoid Mycelium and its poisonous spores.

“Aye!” Captain Widdershins admitted, and smoothed his mustache with one gloved finger. “Well, I’m going to tell V.F.D. all about this! Aye! All four of you volunteers will receive citations for bravery!”

The Baudelaires looked at one another as best they could through the small circular windows. A citation for bravery is nothing more than a piece of paper stating that you have been courageous at some time, and such citations have not been known to be very useful when confronted by danger, whether deep underwater, or, as the Baudelaires would eventually learn, high up in the air. Anyone can write up a citation for bravery, and I have even been known to write one for myself from time to time, in order to keep my spirits up in the middle of a treacherous journey. The three siblings were more interested in surviving their voyage through the Gorgonian Grotto than in receiving a written statement complimenting them on their courage, but they knew Captain Widdershins was trying to keep their spirits up as he led them down the corridor and into the room where they had first encountered the captain of the *Queequeg*.

"To get into the water," the captain said, "you just climb up that same ladder and give a holler when you're at the hatch. Then I'll activate a valve down here, so the submarine won't flood with water when you open it. Then, as I said, you'll just let the current carry you. You should end up in the same place as the sugar bowl."

"And you still won't tell us why the sugar bowl is important?" Violet couldn't help asking.

"It's not the sugar bowl," Captain Widdershins said, "it's what's inside it. Aye! I've already said too much! Aye! There are secrets in this world too terrible for young people to know! Just think—if you knew about the sugar bowl and you somehow fell into Count Olaf's clutches, there's no telling what he'd do! Aye!"

"But look on the bright side," Phil pointed out. "Whatever terrible things may be lurking in that cave, you won't find Count Olaf. There's no way that octopus submarine could fit!"

"Aye!" the captain agreed. "But we'll watch for him on the sonar, just in case! We'll watch you too! Aye! We'll be right here watching you the entire time! The oxygen systems in your helmets make enough noise that you'll appear as four tiny dots on our screen! Now, off you go! Good luck!"

"We'll be wishing you the best!" Phil said.

The adults gave each of the children a pat on the helmet, and without any further hesitation, off went the Baudelaire children with Fiona behind them, following the ladder up to the hatch through which they had come aboard. The four volunteers were quiet as they made their way up, until Violet reached up with one hand—the other hand was clutching Sunny's helmet—and grabbed the handle that opened the hatch.

"We're ready!" she called down, although she did not feel ready at all.

"Aye!" replied the voice of the captain. "I'm activating the valve now! Wait five seconds and then open the hatch! Aye! But don't hesitate! Aye! He who hesitates is lost! Aye! Or she! Aye! Good luck! Aye! Good fortune! Aye! Good journey! Aye! Good-bye!"

There was a distant clanging, presumably the sound of the valve activating, and the four children waited for five seconds, just as you may wish to wait a few seconds yourself, so all thoughts of the Baudelaires' predicament will vanish from your imagination so that you will not be weeping as you learn several boring facts about the water cycle. The water cycle, to review, consists of three key phenomena—evaporation, precipitation, and collection—which are all equally boring and thus equally less upsetting than what happened to the Baudelaires when Violet opened the hatch and the icy, dark waters of the sea rushed into the passageway. If you were to read what happened to them in the moments that followed, you would find yourself unable to sleep as you wept into your pillow and pictured the children all alone in that grim grotto, drifting slowly to the end of the cavern, and yet if you read about the water cycle you would find yourself unable to stay awake, due to the boring description of the process by which water is distributed around the world, and so as a courtesy to you I will continue this book in a way that is best for all concerned.

The water cycle consists of three phenomena—evaporation, precipitation, and collection—which are the three phenomena that make up what is known as "the water cycle." Evaporation, the first of these phenomena, is the process of water turning into vapor and eventually forming clouds, such as those found in cloudy skies, or on cloudy days, or even cloudy nights. These clouds are formed by a phenomenon known as "evaporation," which is the first of three phenomena that make up the water cycle. Evaporation, the first of these three, is simply a term for a process by which water turns into vapor and eventually forms clouds. Clouds can be recognized by their appearance, usually on cloudy days or nights, when they can be seen in cloudy skies. The name for the process by which clouds are formed—by water, which turns into vapor and becomes part of the formation known as "clouds"—is "evaporation," the first phenomenon in the three phenomena that make up the cycle of water, otherwise known as "the water cycle," and surely you must be asleep by now and so can be spared the horrifying details of the Baudelaires' journey.

The instant Violet opened the hatch, the passageway flooded with water, and the children drifted out of the submarine and into the blackness of the Gorgonian Grotto. The Baudelaires knew, of course, that the *Queequeg* had entered an underwater cave, but still they were unprepared for how very dark and cold it was. Sunlight had not reached the waters of the grotto for quite some time—not since Anwhistle Aquatics was still up and running, a phrase which here means "not destroyed under suspicious circumstances"—and the water felt like a freezing black glove, encircling the children with its chilly fingers. As Klaus had predicted after studying the tidal charts, the currents of the cave carried the youngsters away from the submarine, but in the darkness it was impossible to see how fast or far they were going. Within moments the four volunteers lost sight of the *Queequeg*, and then of one another. Had the grotto been equipped with some sort of lighting system, as it once had, the children could have seen a number of things. They might have noticed the mosaic on the grotto floor—thousands and thousands of colorful tiles, depicting noble events from the early history of a secret organization, and portraits of famous writers, scientists, artists, musicians, philosophers, and chefs who had inspired the organization's members. They might have seen an enormous, rusted pumping machine, which was able to drain the entire grotto, or flood it with seawater again, in mere minutes. They might have gazed upward and seen the sharp angles of various Vertical Flame Diversions and other secret passageways that once led all the way up to the marine research center and rhetorical advice service, or even spotted the person who was using one of the passageways now, and probably for the last time, as she made her difficult and dark way toward the *Queequeg.* But instead, all the children could see through their small circular windows was darkness. The Baudelaires had seen darkness before, of course—darkness in secret passageways and tunnels, darkness in abandoned buildings and empty streets, darkness in the eyes of wicked people, and even darkness in other caves. But never before had the orphans felt so completely in the dark as they did now. They did not know where they were, although once Violet felt, very briefly, her feet brush up against something very smooth, like a tile fitted firmly against the ground. They could not tell where they were going, although after a while Klaus had a suspicion that the current had spun him so he was traveling upside down. And they could not tell when they would arrive, although from time to time Sunny saw, through her diving helmet, a tiny dot of light, much like the tiny dots Captain Widdershins said they would appear as on the sonar screen of his submarine.

The Baudelaires drifted along in cold, dark silence, feeling afraid and confused and strangely lonely, and when their journey finally ended, it was so sudden it felt as if they had fallen into a deep, deep sleep, as deep and dark as the cavern itself, and now were being jolted awake. At first, it sounded as if a bushel of broken glass were raining down on the children, but then the children realized they had drifted to the surface of the water, and in one curling, fluid motion, the tide pushed them onto something that felt like a beach, and the three siblings found themselves crawling on a slope of dark, wet sand.

"Klaus?" Violet called through her helmet. "Are you there? What's happened?"

"I don't know," Klaus replied. He could just barely see his sister crawling alongside him. "We couldn't have reached the surface of the sea—we were very, very deep. Is Sunny with you?"

"Yes," Sunny said, from inside her helmet. "Fiona?"

"I'm here," came the voice of the mycologist. "But where are we? How can we still be below the surface of the sea, without any water around us?"

"I'm not sure," Klaus said, "but it must be possible. After all, a submarine can be below the sea and stay dry."

“Are we on another submarine?” Violet asked.

“I dunno,” Sunny said, and frowned in her helmet. “Look!”

The elder Baudelaires looked, although it took them a few moments to realize what Sunny was talking about, as they could not see what direction their sister was pointing. But in a moment they saw two small lights, a short distance from where the volunteers were crawling. Hesitantly, they stood up—except for Sunny, who remained curled up in her helmet—and saw that the lights were coming from a place many lights come from: lamps. A short distance away, standing against the wall, were three floorlamps, each with a letter on its shade. The first lamp had a large V, and the second had an F. The third floorlamp had burnt out, and it was too dim to read the shade, but the children knew, of course, that it must have had a D.

“What is this place?” Fiona asked, but as the children stepped closer they could see what kind of place it was.

As they had suspected, the currents of the Gorgonian Grotto had carried them to a beach, but it was a beach contained in a narrow room. The youngsters stood at the top of the slope of sand and peered at this small, dim room, with smooth tiled walls that looked damp and slippery, and a sand floor covered in an assortment of small objects, some in piles and some half-buried in the sand. The children could see bottles, some still with their corks and caps, and some cans still intact from their journey. There were a few books, their pages bloated as if soaked in water, and a few small cases that looked locked. There was a roller skate, turned upside down, and a deck of cards sitting in two piles, as if someone were about to shuffle them. Here and there were a few pens, sticking out of the sand like porcupine quills, and there were many more objects the children could not identify in the gloom.

“Where are we?” Fiona asked. “Why isn’t this place full of water?”

Klaus looked up, but could not see past a few feet. “This must be a passage of some sort,” Klaus said, “straight up to dry land—an island, maybe, or maybe it curves to the shore.”

"Anwhistle Aquatics," Violet said thoughtfully. "We must be underneath its ruins."

"Oxo?" Sunny asked, which meant "Does that mean we can breathe without our helmets?"

"I think so," Klaus said, and then carefully removed his helmet, an action for which I would have given him a citation for bravery. "Yes," he said. "We can breathe. Everybody take off their helmets—that way, our oxygen systems will recharge."

"But what is this place?" Fiona asked again, removing her helmet. "Why would anybody build a room way down here?"

"It looks like it's been abandoned," Violet said. "It's full of junk."

"Someone must come to change the light-bulbs," Klaus pointed out. "Besides, all this junk was washed up here by the tide, like us."

"And like sugar bowl," Sunny said.

"Of course," Fiona said, looking down at the objects in the sand. "It must be here someplace."

"Let's find it and get out of here," Violet said. "I don't like this place."

"Mission," Sunny said, which meant "Once we find the sugar bowl, our work here is done."

"Not quite," Klaus said. "We'll still have to return to the *Queequeg*—against the current, I might add. Looking for the sugar bowl is only half the battle."

Everyone nodded in agreement, and the four volunteers spread out and began to examine the objects in the sand. Saying that something is half the battle is like saying something is half a sandwich, because it is dangerous to announce that something is half the battle when the much more difficult part might still be waiting in the wings, a phrase which here means "coming up more quickly than you'd like." You might think learning how to boil water is half the battle, only to learn that making a poached egg is much trickier than you thought. You might think that climbing a mountain is half the battle, only to find out that the mountain goats who live at the top are vicious, and heavily armed. And you might think that rescuing a kidnapped ichnologist is half the battle, only to discover that making a poached egg is much trickier than you thought and that the entire battle would be much more difficult and dangerous than you ever would have imagined. The Baudelaires and their mycologist friend thought that looking for the sugar bowl was half the battle, but I'm sorry to tell you that they were wrong, and it is lucky that you fell asleep earlier, during my description of the water cycle, so you will not learn about the other half of the Baudelaires' battle, and the ghastly poison they would end up battling not long after their search through the sand.

"I've found a box of rubber bands," Violet said, after a few minutes, "and a doorknob, two mattress springs, half a bottle of vinegar, and a paring knife, but no sugar bowl."

"I've found an earring, a broken clipboard, a book of poetry, half a stapler, and three swizzle sticks," Klaus said, "but no sugar bowl."

"Three can soup," Sunny said, "jar peanut butter, box crackers, pesto, wasabi, lo mein. But nadasuchre."

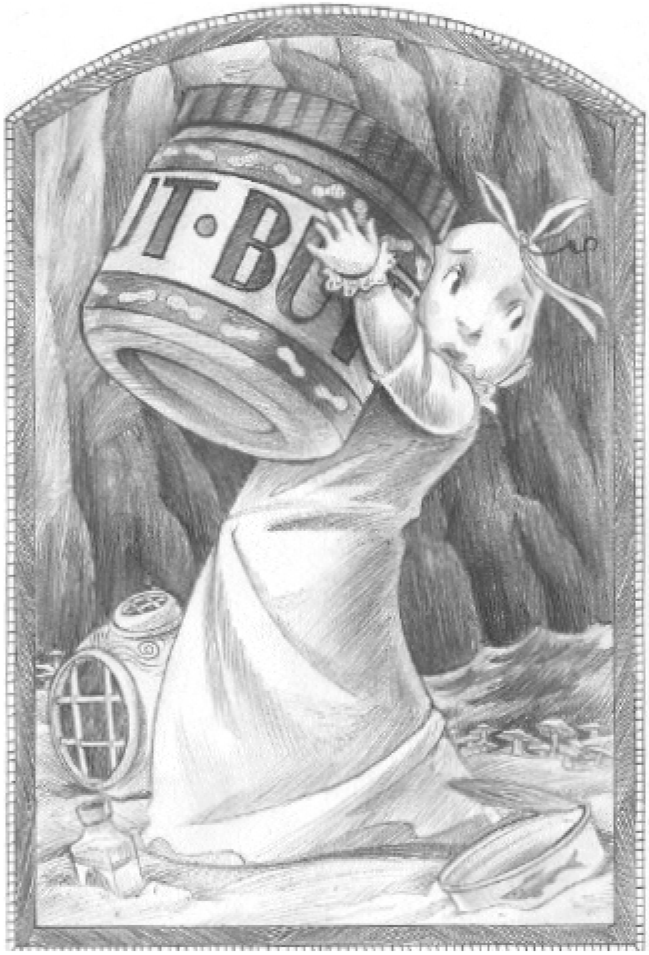
"This is harder than I thought," Klaus said. "What have you found, Fiona?"

Fiona did not answer.

"Fiona?" Klaus asked again, and the Baudelaires turned to look at her. But the mycologist was not looking at the siblings. She was looking past them, and her eyes were wide with fear behind her triangular glasses. "Fiona?" Klaus said, sounding a bit worried. "What have you found?"

Fiona swallowed, and pointed back down at the slope of sand. "Mycelium," she said finally, in a faint whisper, and the Baudelaires turned to see that she had spoken the truth. Sprouting out of the sand, quickly and silently, were the stalks and caps of the Medusoid Mycelium, the fungus

Fiona had described back on the *Queequeg.* The invisible threads of the mycelium, according to her mycological book, waxed and waned, and had been waning when the volunteers drifted ashore, which meant that the mushrooms had been hiding underground when the children had arrived at this strange room. But now, as time passed, they were waxing, and sprouting up all over the beach and even along the smooth, tiled walls. At first just a handful were visible—each one a dark, gray color, with black splotches on the caps as if they were spattered with ink—and then more and more, like a silent, deadly crowd that had gathered on the beach and was staring blindly at the terrified children. The mushrooms only ventured halfway up the slope of sand, so it seemed that the poisonous fungus was not going to engulf them—not yet, anyway. But as the mycelium continued to wax, the entire beach sprouted in sinister mushrooms, and until it waned the Baudelaires had to huddle on the sand, in the light of the floorlamps, and stare back at the venomous mycological crowd. More and more mushrooms appeared, crowding the strange shore and piling up on top of one another as if they were pushing and shoving to get a good look at the trapped and frightened children. Looking for the sugar bowl may have been half the battle, but now the Baudelaire orphans were trapped, and that half was much, much more troubling.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CHAPTER
Seven

The word “lousy,” like the word “volunteer,” the word “fire,” the word “department,” and many other words found in dictionaries and other important documents, has a number of different definitions depending on the exact circumstances in which it is used. There is the common definition of the word “lousy,” meaning “bad,” and this definition of “lousy” has described many things in my history of the Baudelaire orphans, from the sinister smells of Lousy Lane, along which the children traveled long ago, to their lousy journey up and down the Mortmain Mountains in search of theV.F.D. headquarters. There is the medical definition of the word “lousy,” meaning “infested with lice,” and this definition of “lousy” has not appeared in my work at all, although as Count Olaf’s hygiene gets worse and worse I may find occasion to use it. And then there is a somewhat obscure definition of the word “lousy,” meaning “abundantly supplied,” the way Count Olaf is lousy with treacherous plans, or the *Queequeg* is lousy with metal pipes, or the entire world is lousy with unfathomable secrets, and it is this definition that the Baudelaire orphans pondered, as they huddled with Fiona underneath the mysterious floorlamps of the Gorgonian Grotto, and watched more and more mushrooms sprout from the sand. As their surroundings became lousy with the Medusoid Mycelium, the children thought of all the other things in their lives with which they were abundantly supplied. The children’s lives were lousy with mystery, from the mysteries of V.F.D. to the mysteries of their own futures, with each mystery crowding the others like the stalks and caps of the poisonous fungi. Their lives were lousy with danger, from the dangers they had encountered above mountains and underneath buildings, to the dangers they had faced inside the city and out in the hinterlands, from the dangers of villainous people to the dangers of kind people who did not know any better. And their lives were lousy with lousiness, from terrible people to horrible meals, from terrifying locations to horrifying circumstances, and from dreadful inconveniences to inconvenient dreads, so that it seemed that their lives would always be lousy, lousy with lousy days and lousy with lousy nights, even if all of the lousy things with which their lives were lousy became less lousy, and less lousy with lousiness, over the lousy course of each lousy-with-lousiness moment, and with each new lousy mushroom, making the cave lousier and lousier with lousiness, it was almost too much for the Baudelaire orphans to bear.

“Lousy,” Sunny said.

“This is not good news,” Klaus agreed. “Fiona, do you think we’ve been poisoned already?”

“No,” Fiona said firmly. “The spores shouldn’t reach us here. As long as we stay here at the far end of the cavern, and the mushrooms don’t advance any further, we should be safe.”

“It looks like they’ve stopped advancing,” Violet said, pointing at the line of gray mushrooms, and the other volunteers saw that she was right. There were still new mushrooms popping up, but the fungus didn’t seem to be getting any closer to the four children.

“I guess the mycelium has only grown that far,” Fiona said. “We’re very lucky.”

“I don’t feel very lucky,” Klaus said. “I feel trapped. How will we get out of here?”

“There’s only one way,” Violet said. “The only path back to the *Queequeg* leads through those mushrooms.”

“If we go through the mushrooms,” Fiona said, “we’ll most likely be poisoned. One spore could easily slip through our suits.”

“Antidote?” Sunny asked.

“I might find the recipe for a cure,” Fiona replied, “someplace in my mycological library. But we don’t want to take that chance. We’ll have to exit another way.”

For a moment, all four children looked up, into the blackness of the passage above their heads. Violet frowned, and put one hand on the damp and slippery tiles of the wall. With the other hand she reached into the waterproof pocket of her uniform, and drew out a ribbon to tie up her hair.

“Can we go out that way?” Klaus asked. “Can you invent something to help us climb up that passageway?”

“Tingamebob,” Sunny said, which meant “There’s plenty of materials here in the sand.”

“Materials aren’t the problem,” Violet said, and peered up into the blackness. “We’re far below the surface of the water. It must be miles and miles to the surface. Even the best climbing device would wear out over the journey, and if it did we’d fall all the way down.”

“But someone must use that passageway,” Klaus said. “Otherwise it wouldn’t have been built.”

“It doesn’t matter,” Fiona said. “We can’t go out that way. We need to get to the *Queequeg*. Otherwise, my stepfather will wonder what’s become of us. Eventually he’d put on his diving helmet and go investigate…”

“And the tide would carry him right into the poisonous fungus,” Klaus finished. “Fiona’s right. Even if we could climb all the way up, it’d be the wrong way to go.”

“But what else can we do?” Violet said, her voice rising. “We can’t spend the rest of our lives in this miserable place!”

Fiona looked at the mushrooms and sighed. "*Mushroom Minutiae* said that this fungus waxes and wanes. Right now it's waxing. We'll have to wait until it wanes again, and then run quickly over the sand and swim back down to the submarine."

"But how long will it be until it starts waning?" Klaus said.

"I don't know," Fiona admitted. "It could be just a few minutes, or a few hours. It could even be a few days."

"A few days?" Violet said. "In a few days your stepfather will give up on us! In a few days we'll miss the V.F.D. gathering! We can't wait a few days!"

"It's our only choice," Klaus said, putting a comforting hand on Violet's shoulder. "We can wait until the mushrooms disappear, or we can find ourselves poisoned."

"That's not a choice at all," Violet replied bitterly.

"It's a Hobson's choice," Klaus said. "Remember?"

The eldest Baudelaire looked down at her brother and gave him a small smile. "Of course I remember," she said.

"Mamasan," Sunny said. Her siblings looked down at her, and Violet picked her up in her arms.

"Who's Hobson?" Fiona asked. "What was his choice?"

Klaus smiled. "Thomas Hobson lived in Britain in the seventeenth century," he said. "He was in charge of a stable, and according to legend, he always told his customers they had a choice: they could take the horse closest to the door, or no horse at all."

"That's not really a choice," Fiona said.

Violet smiled. "Precisely," she said. "A Hobson's choice is something that's not a choice at all. It's an expression our mother used to use. She'd say, ‘I’ll give you a Hobson’s choice, Violet—you can clean your room or I will stand in the doorway and sing your least favorite song over and over.’”

Fiona grinned. “What was your least favorite song?” she asked.

“‘Row, Row, Row Your Boat,’” Violet said. “I hate the part about life being but a dream.”

“She’d offer me the Hobson’s choice of doing the dishes or reading the poetry of Edgar Guest,” Klaus said. “He’s my absolute least favorite poet.”

“Bath or pink dress,” Sunny said.

“Did your mother always joke around like that?” Fiona asked. “Mine used to get awfully mad if I didn’t clean my room.”

“Our mother would get mad, too,” Klaus said. “Remember, Violet, when we left the window of the library open, and that night it rained?”

“She really flew off the handle,” Violet said, using a phrase which here means “became extremely angry.” “We spoiled an atlas that she said was irreplaceable.”

“You should have heard her yell,” Klaus said. “Our father came down from his study to see what was the matter.”

“And then he started yelling, too,” Violet said, and the Baudelaires paused and looked at one another uncomfortably. Everyone yells, of course, from time to time, but the Baudelaire children did not like to think about their parents yelling, particularly now that they were no longer around to apologize or explain themselves. It is often difficult to admit that someone you love is not perfect, or to consider aspects of a person that are less than admirable. To the Baudelaires it felt almost as if they had drawn a line after their parents died—a secret line in their memories, separating all the wonderful things about the Baudelaire parents from the things that perhaps were not quite so wonderful. Since the fire, whenever they thought of their parents, the Baudelaires never stepped over this secret line, preferring to ponder the best moments the family had together rather than any of the times when they had fought, or been unfair or selfish. But now, suddenly, in the gloom of the Gorgonian Grotto, the siblings had stumbled across that line and found themselves thinking of that angry afternoon in the library, and in moments other angry afternoons and evenings had occurred to them until their brains were lousy with memories of all stripes, a phrase which here means "both good and bad." It gave the siblings a queasy feeling to cross this line in their memories, and admit that their parents were sometimes difficult, and it made them feel all the queasier to realize they could not step back, and pretend they had never remembered these less-than-perfect moments, any more than they could step back in time, and once again find themselves safe in the Baudelaire home, before fire and Count Olaf had appeared in their lives.

"My brother used to get angry, too," Fiona said. "Before he disappeared, he would have awful fights with my stepfather—late at night, when they thought I was asleep."

"Your stepfather didn't mention that," Violet said. "He said your brother was a charming man."

"Maybe he only remembers the charming parts," Fiona replied. "Maybe he doesn't want to remember everything. Maybe he wants to keep those parts secret."

"Do you think your stepfather knew about this place?" Klaus asked, looking around the eerie room. "He mentioned that we might find a place to take off our diving helmets, remember? It seemed strange at the time."

"I don't know," Fiona said. "Maybe that's another secret he was keeping."

"Like the sugar bowl," Violet said.

"Speaking which," Sunny said.

"Sunny's right," Klaus said. "We should keep looking for the sugar bowl."

"It must be here someplace," Fiona agreed, "and besides, we need some way to pass the time until the fungus wanes. Everyone should spread out, and give a shout if you find the sugar bowl."

The Baudelaires nodded in agreement, and the four volunteers took distant positions on the sand, taking care not to step any closer to the Medusoid Mycelium. For the next few hours, they dug through the sand floor of the grotto and examined what they found by the light of the two floorlamps. Each layer of sand uncovered several items of interest, but no matter how many objects the children encountered, no one gave a shout. Violet found a butter dish, a length of electrical wire, and an odd, square stone with messages carved in three languages, but not what she was looking for, and so the eldest Baudelaire remained silent. Klaus found a box of toothpicks, a small hand puppet, and a ring made of dull metal, but not what he had come to the cave to find, and so the middle Baudelaire merely sighed. And Sunny found two cloth napkins, a broken telephone receiver, and a fancy wineglass filled with holes, but when she finally opened her mouth to speak, the youngest Baudelaire merely said, "Snack!" which meant something like, "Why don't we stop for a bite to eat?" and quickly opened the crackers and peanut butter she had found.

"Thanks, Sunny," Fiona said, taking a cracker spread with peanut butter. "I must say, Baudelaires, I'm getting frustrated. My hands ache from all that digging, but there's no sign of the sugar bowl."

"I'm beginning to think this is a fool's errand," Violet said, using a phrase which here means "errand performed by a fool." "We journeyed all the way down here to find a crucial item, and instead it seems like we're finding nothing but junk. It's a waste of time."

"Not necessarily," Klaus said, eating a cracker and looking at the items he had found. "We may not have found the sugar bowl, but I think we did find some crucial information."

"What do you mean?" Violet said.

"Look at this," Klaus said, and held up a book he had taken from the sand. "It's a collection of poetry, and most of it is too damp to read. But look at the title page.”

The middle Baudelaire held open the book so the other volunteers could see. *“Versed Furtive Disclosure,”* Violet read out loud.

“V.F.D.,” Sunny said.

“Yes,” Klaus said. “‘Furtive’ means ‘secretive,’ and ‘disclosure’ means ‘to reveal something.’ I think V.F.D. may have hidden things here—not just the sugar bowl, but other secrets.”

“That would make sense,” Violet said. “This grotto is a bit like a secret passageway— like the one we found underneath our home, or the one Quigley found underneath his.”

Fiona nodded, and began to search through a pile of items she had taken from the sand. “I found an envelope earlier,” she said, “but I didn’t think to open it. I was too busy concentrating on the sugar bowl.”

“Punctilio,” Sunny said, holding up a torn and tattered sheet of newspaper. The children could see the letters “V.F.D.” circled in a headline.

“I’m too exhausted to dig anymore,” Violet said. “Let’s spend some time reading instead. Klaus, you can examine that poetry book. Fiona, you can see if there’s anything worthwhile in that envelope. And I’ll take a look at the clipping Sunny found.”

“Me?” asked Sunny, whose reading skills were still developing.

“Why don’t you cook us something, Sunny,” Klaus suggested with a smile. “Those crackers just whetted my appetite.”

“Pronto,” the youngest Baudelaire promised, looking at the foodstuffs she had found in the sand, most of which were sealed up tight. The phrase “whet my appetite,” as you probably know, refers to one’s hunger being awakened, and usually it refers to food. The Baudelaires had lost track of time while searching through the sand of the grotto, and the snack Sunny prepared made them realize just how long it had been since they had eaten.

But another appetite had been whetted for the Baudelaires as well—a hunger for secrets, and for information that might help them. As Sunny began to prepare a meal for her fellow volunteers, Violet and Klaus looked over the materials they had found, devouring whatever information seemed important, and Fiona did the same thing, leaning up against the tiled wall of the cavern as she examined the contents of the envelope she had found. The volunteers' hunger for information was almost as fierce as their hunger for food, and after a lengthy period of studying and note taking, whisking and mixing, the four children could not say whether they were more eager to hear about the others' research or to eat the meal Sunny had prepared.

"What is this?" Violet asked her sister, peering into the fishbowl Sunny was using as a serving dish.

"Pesto lo mein," Sunny explained.

"What my sister means," Klaus said, "is that she found a package of soft Chinese noodles, which she tossed with an Italian basil sauce she got out of a jar."

"That's quite an international combination," Fiona said.

"Hobson," Sunny said, which meant "I didn't have much choice, given our surroundings," and then held up another item she had found. "Wasabi?"

"What's wasabi?" Violet asked.

"It's a Japanese condiment," Klaus said. "It's very spicy, and often served with fish."

"Why don't we save the wasabi, Sunny," Violet said, taking the tin of wasabi and putting it in the pocket of her uniform. "We'll take it back to the *Queequeg* and you can use it in a seafood recipe."

Sunny nodded in agreement, and passed the fishbowl to her siblings. "Utensi," she said.

“We can use these swizzle sticks as chopsticks,” Klaus said. “We’ll have to take turns, and whoever isn’t eating can tell us what they’ve discovered. Here, Fiona, why don’t you go first?”

“Thanks,” Fiona said, taking the swizzle sticks gratefully. “I’m quite hungry. Did you learn anything from that poetry book?”

“Not as much as I would have liked,” Klaus said. “Most of the pages were soaked from their journey, and so I couldn’t read much. But I believe I’ve learned a new code: Verse Fluctuation Declaration. It’s a way to communicate by substituting words in poems.”

“I don’t understand,” Violet said.

“It’s a bit tricky,” Klaus said, opening his commonplace book, in which he’d copied the information. “The book uses a poem called ‘My Last Duchess,’ by Robert Browning, as an example.”

“I’ve read that,” Fiona said, twirling a few noodles around a swizzle stick to get them into her mouth. “It’s a very creepy story about a man who murders his wife.”

“Right,” Klaus said. “But if a volunteer used the name of the poem in a coded communication, the title might be ‘My Last Wife’ instead of ‘My Last Duchess,’ by the poet ‘Obert Browning’ instead of Robert Browning.’’

“What purpose would that serve?” Violet said.

“The volunteer reading it would notice the mistake,” Klaus said. “The changing of certain words or letters is a kind of fluctuation. If you fixed the fluctuations in the poem, you’d receive the message.”

“Duchess R?” Fiona asked. “What kind of message is that?”

“I’m not sure,” Klaus admitted. “The next page in the book is missing.”

“Do you think the missing page is a code, too?” Violet asked.

Klaus shrugged. “I don’t know,” he said. “Codes are nothing more than a way of talking so that some people understand and other people don’t. Remember when we talked to Quigley in the cave, with all the other Snow Scouts listening?”

“Yes,” Violet said. “We used words that began with V, F, and D, so that we knew we were all on the same side.”

“Maybe we should have a code ourselves,” Fiona said, “so that we can communicate if we run into trouble.”

“That’s a good idea,” Klaus said. “What should we use as code words?”

“Food,” Sunny suggested.

“Perfect,” Violet said. “We’ll draw up a list of foods and what they mean in our code. We’ll bring them up in conversation, and our enemies will never suspect that we’re actually communicating.”

“And our enemies could be around any corner,” Fiona said, handing the fishbowl of lo mein to Violet and picking up the envelope she had found. “Inside this envelope was a letter. Normally I don’t like to read other people’s mail, but it seems unlikely that this letter will ever reach Gregor Anwhistle.”

“Gregor Anwhistle?” Violet asked. “He’s the man who founded the research center. Who was writing to him?”

“A woman named Kit,” Fiona said. “I think it’s Kit Snicket—Jacques’s sister.”

“Of course,” Klaus said. “Your stepfather said she was a noble woman who helped build the *Queequeg*.”

“According to her letter,” Fiona said, “Gregor Anwhistle was involved in something called a ‘schism.’ What’s that?”

“It was a big conflict within V.F.D.,” Klaus said. “Quigley told us a little bit about it.”

“Everybody chose sides,” Violet recalled, “and now the organization is in chaos. Which side was Gregor on?”

“I don’t know,” Fiona said, frowning. “Some of this letter is in code, and some of it was in water. I can’t understand all of it, but it sounds like Gregor was involved with something called Volatile Fungus Deportation.”

“‘Volatile’ means ‘unstable,’ or ‘likely to cause trouble,’” Klaus said. “‘Fungus,’ of course, means ‘mushrooms,’ and ‘deportation’ means ‘moving something from one place to another.’ Who was moving unstable mushrooms?”

“V.F.D.,” Fiona replied. “During the schism, Gregor thought the Medusoid Mycelium might be useful.”

“The Medusoid Mycelium?” Violet said, looking nervously at the silent, gray mushrooms that still lined the entrance to the small, tiled room, their black splotches looking particularly eerie in the dim light. “I can’t imagine thinking that such deadly things could be useful.”

“Listen to what Kit wrote about it,” Fiona said. “‘The poisonous fungus you insist on cultivating in the grotto will bring grim consequences for all of us. Our factory at Lousy Lane can provide some dilution of the mycelium’s destructive respiratory capabilities, and you assure me that the mycelium grows best in small, enclosed spaces, but this is of little comfort. One mistake, Gregor, and your entire facility would have to be abandoned. Please, do not become the thing you dread most by adopting the destructive tactic of our most villainous enemies: playing with fire.’”

Klaus was busily copying Kit Snicket’s letter into his commonplace book. “Gregor was growing those mushrooms,” he said, “to use on enemies of V.F.D.”

“He was going to poison people?” Violet asked.

“Villainous people,” Fiona replied, “but Kit Snicket thought that using poisonous mushrooms was equally villainous. They were working on a way to weaken the poison, in a factory on Lousy Lane. But the writer of this letter still thought that Volatile Fungus Deportation was too dangerous, and she warned Gregor that if he wasn't careful, the mycelium would poison the entire research center."

"And now the center is gone," Violet said, "and the mycelium remains. Something went very wrong, right here where we're sitting."

"I still don't understand it," Klaus said. "Was Gregor a villain?"

"I think he was volatile," Fiona said, "like the Medusoid Mycelium. And the writer of this letter says that if you cultivate something volatile, then you're playing with fire."

Violet shuddered, stopped eating her pesto lo mein, and put down the fishbowl. "Playing with fire," of course, is an expression that refers to any dangerous or risky activity, such as writing a letter to a volatile person, or journeying through a dark cave filled with a poisonous fungus in order to search for an object that was taken away quite some time before, and the Baudelaires did not like to think about the fire they were playing with, or the fires that had already been played with in this damp and mysterious room. For a moment, nobody spoke, and the Baudelaires gazed at the stalks and caps of the deadly mushrooms, wondering what had gone wrong with Anwhistle Aquatics. They wondered how the schism began. And they wondered about all of the mysterious and villainous things that seemed to surround the three orphans, drawing closer and closer as their woeful lives went on and on, and if such mysteries would ever be solved and if such villains ever defeated.

"Wane," Sunny said suddenly, and the children saw it was true. The crowd of mushrooms seemed to be just a bit smaller, and here and there they saw a stalk and cap disappear back into the sand, as if the poisonous fungus had decided to implement an alternate strategy, a phrase which here means "would terrorize the Baudelaires in another way."

"Sunny's right," Klaus said with relief. "The Medusoid Mycelium is waning. Soon it'll be safe enough to return to the *Queequeg*."

“It must be a fairly short cycle,” Fiona said, making a note in her commonplace book. “How long do you think we’ve been here?”

“All night, at least,” Violet said, unfolding the sheet of newspaper Sunny had found. “It’s lucky we found all these materials, otherwise we would have been quite bored.”

“My brother always had a deck of cards with him,” Fiona remembered, “in case he was stuck in a boring situation. He invented this card game called Fernald’s Folly, and we used to play it together whenever we had a long wait.”

“Fernald?” Violet asked. “Was that your brother’s name?”

“Yes,” Fiona said. “Why do you ask?”

“I was just curious,” she said, hurriedly tucking the newspaper into the pocket of her uniform. There was just enough room to slip it next to the tin of wasabi.

“Aren’t you going to tell us what was in the newspaper?” Klaus asked. “I saw the headline said V.F.D.”

“I didn’t learn anything,” Violet said. “The article was too blurred to read.”

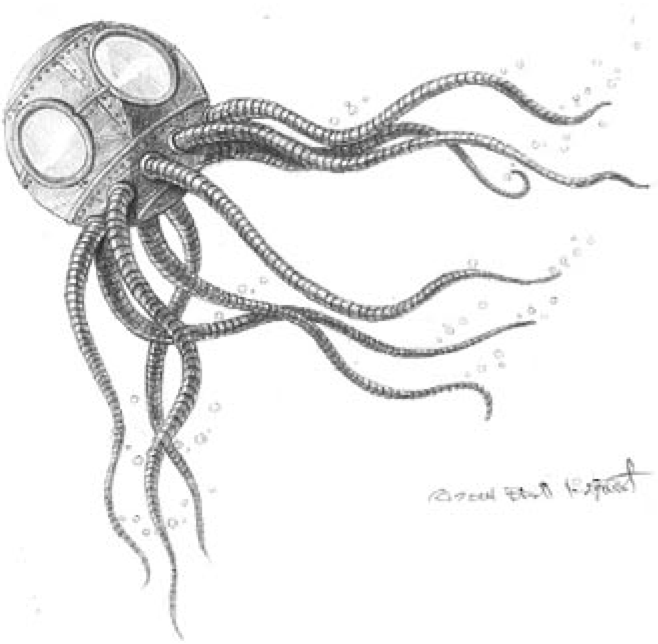
“Hmmm,” Sunny said, and gave her sister a sly look. The youngest Baudelaire had known Violet since she was born, of course, and found it quite easy to tell when she was lying. Violet looked back at Sunny, and then at Klaus, and shook her head, very, very slightly.

“Why don’t we get ready to go?” the eldest Baudelaire suggested. “By the time we pack up these documents and put on our diving helmets, the fungus will have waned completely.”

“You’re right,” Fiona said. “Here, Sunny, I’ll help you get into your helmet. It’s the least I can do after you cooked such a delicious meal.”

“Shivalrush,” Sunny said, which meant “That’s very kind of you,” and although Fiona had not known Sunny very long, she understood what the youngest Baudelaire had said, more or less, and smiled at all three of the Baudelaire siblings. As the four volunteers suited up—a phrase which here means “prepared their helmets for an underwater journey”—the Baudelaire children felt as if Fiona fit them like a glove—as a friend, or possibly something more. It felt as if Fiona and the Baudelaires were part of the same team, or the same organization, trying to solve the same mysteries and defeat the same villains. It felt that way to the two younger Baudelaires, anyway. Only Violet felt as if their friendship were more volatile, as if Fiona fit her like the wrong glove, or as if their friendship had a tiny flaw—a flaw that might turn into a schism. As Violet put the diving helmet over her head, and made sure that the zipper of the uniform was zipped tight over the portrait of Herman Melville, she heard the slight rustle of the newspaper clipping in her pocket and frowned. She kept frowning as the last of the mushrooms disappeared into the sand, and the four children stepped carefully back into the icy dark water. Because they were traveling against the tide, the volunteers had decided to hold hands, so they would not lose track of one another as they returned to the *Queequeg*, and as their dark journey began, Violet thought of the dangerous and risky secret concealed in her pocket and realized, as Klaus led the way back to the submarine, with Fiona holding Klaus’s hand, and Violet holding Fiona’s, and Sunny, curled in her helmet, tucked tightly under Violet’s arm, that even while swimming in the icy depths of the ocean, the Baudelaires were playing with fire. The sinister information in the newspaper clipping was like a tiny spore, blossoming in the small, enclosed space of Violet’s pocket—like a spore of the deadly Medusoid Mycelium, which at that very moment was blossoming in the small, enclosed space of a diving helmet worn by one of the Baudelaire orphans.

CHAPTER
Eight



The water cycle consists of three phenomena: evaporation, precipitation, and collection, three phenomena known collectively as the three phenomena of what is referred to as “the water cycle.” The second of these phenomena—precipitation—is the process by which vapor turns into water and falls as rain, something you might notice during a rainfall or by going outdoors on a rainy morning, afternoon, evening, or night. This falling water you notice is known as “rain,” which is the result of the phenomenon of precipitation, one of the three phenomena that comprise the water cycle. Of these three phenomena, precipitation is regarded as the second one, particularly if a list of the three phenomena places precipitation in the middle, or second, spot on the list. “Precipitation” is quite simply a term for the transformation of vapor into water, which then falls as rain—something you might encounter if you were to step outside during a rainstorm. Rain consists of water, which was formerly vapor but underwent the process known as “precipitation,” one of the three phenomena in the water cycle, and by now this tedious description must have put you back to sleep, so you may avoid the gruesome details of my account of Violet, Klaus, and Sunny Baudelaire as they made their way through the Gorgonian Grotto back to the *Queequeg*.

The Baudelaire orphans knew that something was wrong the moment they arrived at the submarine, knocked on the metal hatch, and heard no answer from the captain inside. It had been a dark and cold journey back through the cave, made all the more difficult by the fact that they were swimming against the tide, rather than letting the current carry them along. Klaus, who was leading the way, swept one arm in front of him from side to side, fearful that he would miss the *Queequeg* altogether, or brush his hand against something sinister lurking in the cavern. Fiona trembled throughout the entire journey, and Violet could feel her nervous fingers twitching as she held her hand. And Sunny tried not to panic inside her diving helmet, as her siblings' swim made her bounce up and down in the blackness. The youngest Baudelaire could not see a single light through the small round window in her helmet, but as with all of the Baudelaires, she concentrated on arriving safely, and the thought of returning to the *Queequeg* felt like a small light glowing in the gloom of the grotto. Soon, the Baudelaires thought, they would hear the booming "Aye!" of Captain Widdershins as he welcomed them back from their mission. Perhaps Phil would have cooked them a nice hot meal, even without the culinary assistance of Sunny. And perhaps the telegram device would have received another Volunteer Factual Dispatch, one that might help them find the sugar bowl so their entire journey would not have been a fool's errand. But when Klaus led them to the hatch, they found no sign that anyone aboard the *Queequeg* was welcoming them.

After knocking for several minutes, the worried children had to open the hatch by themselves, a difficult task in the dark, and enter the passageway, quickly closing the hatch behind them. They grew more worried as they discovered that nobody had activated the hatch, so quite a bit of water flowed into the passageway and poured down to the room in which the Baudelaires had first met Captain Widdershins. They could hear the water splashing on the submarine floor as they began their climb down, and strained to hear the captain shouting "Aye! What a mess!" or "Aye! The valve is broken!" or even something optimistic from Phil, like "Look on the bright side—it's like having a wading pool!"

"Captain Widdershins?" Violet called, her voice muffled through her helmet.

"Stepfather?" Fiona called, her voice muffled through hers.

"Phil?" Klaus called.

"Crew?" Sunny called.

Nobody answered these calls, and nobody commented on the water from the passageway, and when the volunteers reached the end of the passageway and lowered themselves into the small, dim room, they found nobody there to meet them.

"Stepfather?" Fiona called again, but they heard only the movement of the water as it settled into a large puddle on the floor. Without bothering to take off their helmets, the four children splashed through the water and hurried down the hallway, past the plaque with the captain's personal philosophy engraved on it, until they reached the Main Hall. The room was just as enormous as ever, of course, with all of the bewildering pipes, panels, and warning signs, although it seemed as if the place had been tidied up a bit, and there was now a tiny bit of decoration near the wooden table where the Baudelaires had eaten Sunny's chowder and planned their journey through the Gorgonian Grotto. Tied to three chairs were small blue balloons that hovered in the air, and each balloon had a letter printed on its surface in thick, black ink. The first balloon read "V," the second read "F," and only someone as dim as an underwater cave would be surprised to hear that the third read "D."

"V.F.D.," Violet said. "Do you think it's a code?"

"I'm not interested in codes at the moment," Fiona said, her voice tense and echoey inside her helmet. "I want to find my crewmates. Look around, everyone."

The Baudelaires looked around the room, but it seemed as empty and lonely as the grotto. Without the enormous presence of Captain Widdershins—“enormous presence” is a phrase which here means “large physical size, combined with a vibrant personality and loud voice”—the Main Hall seemed utterly deserted.

“Maybe they’re in the kitchen,” Klaus said, although it sounded like he didn’t believe it himself, “or napping in the barracks.”

“They wouldn’t have napped,” Violet said. “They said they’d be watching us the entire time.”

Fiona took a step toward the door to the kitchen, but then stopped and looked at the wooden table. “Their helmets are gone,” she said. “Both Phil and my stepfather were keeping their diving helmets on the table, in case of an emergency.” She ran her hand along the table, as if she could make the helmets reappear. “They’re gone,” she said. “They’ve left the *Queequeg.*”

“I can’t believe that,” Klaus said, shaking his head. “They knew we were traveling through the grotto. They wouldn’t abandon their fellow volunteers.”

“Maybe they thought we weren’t coming back,” Fiona said.

“No,” Violet said, pointing to a panel on the wall. “They could see us. We were tiny green dots on the sonar detector.”

The children looked at the sonar panel, hoping to see dots that might represent their missing crewmates. “They must have had a very good reason to leave,” Fiona said.

“What reason could there be?” Klaus said. “No matter what occurred, they would have waited for us.”

“No,” Fiona said. Sadly, she removed her diving helmet, and the middle Baudelaire saw she had tears in her eyes. “No matter what occurred,” she said, “my stepfather wouldn’t have hesitated. He or she who hesitates is…”

"Lost," Klaus finished for her, and put his hand on her shoulder.

"Maybe they didn't go of their own volition," Violet said, using a phrase which here means "by choice." "Maybe somebody took them."

"Took the crew away," Klaus said, "and left behind three balloons?"

"It's a mystery," Violet said, "but I'm sure it's one we can solve. Let's just take off our helmets, and we can get to work."

Klaus nodded, and removed his diving helmet, putting it down on the floor next to Fiona's. Violet removed hers, and then went to open the tiny door of Sunny's helmet, so the youngest Baudelaire could uncurl herself from the small, enclosed space and join her siblings. But Fiona grabbed Violet's hand before it reached the helmet, and stopped her, pointing through the small round window in Sunny's helmet.

There are many things in this world that are difficult to see. An ice cube in a glass of water, for instance, might pass unnoticed, particularly if the ice cube is small, and the glass of water is ten miles in diameter. A short woman might be difficult to see on a crowded city street, particularly if she has disguised herself as a mailbox, and people keep putting letters in her mouth. And a small, ceramic bowl, with a tight-fitting lid to keep something important inside, might be difficult to find in the laundry room of an enormous hotel, particularly if there were a terrible villain nearby, making you feel nervous and distracted. But there are also things that are difficult to see not because of the size of their surroundings, or a clever disguise, or a treacherous person with a book of matches in his pocket and a fiendish plot in his brain, but because the things are so upsetting to look at, so distressing to believe, that it is as if your eyes refuse to see what is right in front of them. You can glance into a mirror, and not see how old you are growing, or how unattractive your hairstyle has become, until someone kindly points those things out to you. You can gaze upon a place you once lived, and not see how terribly the building has changed, or how sinister the neighborhood has become, until you walk a few paces to an ice-cream store and notice that your favorite flavor has been discontinued. And you can stare into the small, round window of a diving helmet, as Violet and Klaus did at that moment, and not see the stalks and caps of a terrible gray fungus growing poisonously on the glass, until someone utters its scientific name in a horrified whisper. “It’s the Medusoid Mycelium,” Fiona said, and the two elder Baudelaires blinked and saw that it was so.

“Oh no,” Violet murmured. *“Oh no!”*

“Get her out!” Klaus cried. “Get Sunny out at once, or she’ll be poisoned!”

“No!” Fiona said, and snatched the helmet away from the siblings. She put it down on the table as if it were a tureen, a word which here means “a wide, deep dish used for serving stew or soup, instead of a small, terrified girl curled up in a piece of deep-sea equipment.” “The diving helmet can serve as quarantine. If we open it, the fungus will spread. The entire submarine could become a field of mushrooms.”

“We can’t leave our sister in there!” Violet cried. “The spores will poison her!”

“She’s probably been poisoned already,” Fiona said quietly. “In a small, enclosed space like that helmet, there’s no way she could escape.”

“That can’t be true,” Klaus said, taking off his glasses as if refusing to see the horror of their situation. But at that moment their predicament became perfectly clear, as the children heard a small, eerie sound come from the helmet. It reminded Violet and Klaus of the fish of the Stricken Stream, struggling to breathe in the ashy, black waters. Sunny was coughing.

“Sunny!” Klaus shouted into the helmet.

“Malady,” Sunny said, which meant “I’m beginning to feel unwell.”

“Don’t talk, Sunny!” Fiona called through the tiny window of the helmet, and turned to the elder Baudelaires. “The mycelium has destructive respiratory capabilities,” the mycologist explained, walking over to the sideboard. “That’s what it said in that letter. Your sister should save her breath. The spores will make it more and more difficult for Sunny to talk, and she'll probably start coughing as the fungus grows inside her. In an hour's time, she won't be able to breathe. It would be fascinating if it weren't so horrible."

"Fascinating?" Violet covered her mouth with her hands and shut her eyes, trying not to imagine what her terrified sister was feeling. "What can we do?" she asked.

"We can make an antidote," Fiona said. "There must be some useful information in my mycological library."

"I'll help," Klaus said. "I'm sure I'll find the books difficult to read, but —"

"No," Fiona said. "I need to be alone to do my research. You and Violet should climb that rope ladder and fire up the engines so we can get out of this cave."

"But we should all do the research!" Violet cried. "We only have an hour, or maybe even less! If the mushrooms grew while we swam back to the *Queequeg,* then—"

"Then we certainly don't have time to argue," Fiona finished, opening the cabinet and removing a large pile of books. "I order you to leave me alone, so I can do this research and save your sister!"

The elder Baudelaires looked at one another, and then at the diving helmet on the table. "You *order* us?" Klaus asked.

"Aye!" Fiona cried, and the children realized it was the first time the mycologist had uttered that word. "I'm in charge here! With my stepfather gone, I am the captain of the *Queequeg*! Aye!"

"It doesn't matter who the captain is!" Violet said. "The important thing is to save my sister!"

"Climb up that rope ladder!" Fiona cried. "Aye! Fire up those engines! Aye! We're going to save Sunny! Aye! And find my stepfather! Aye! And retrieve the sugar bowl! Aye! And it's no time to hesitate! She who hesitates is lost! That's my personal philosophy!"

"That's the captain's personal philosophy," Klaus said, "not yours."

"I am the captain!" Fiona said fiercely. The middle Baudelaire could see that behind her triangular glasses, the mycologist was crying. "Go and do what I say."

Klaus opened his mouth to say something more, but found that he, too, was crying, and without another word turned from his friend and walked over to the rope ladder, with Violet following behind.

"She's wrong!" the eldest Baudelaire whispered furiously. "You know she's wrong, Klaus. What are we going to do?"

"We're going to fire up the engines," Klaus said, "and steer the *Queequeg* out of this cave."

"But that won't save Sunny," Violet said. "Don't you remember the description of the Medusoid Mycelium?"

"'A single spore has such grim power,' " Klaus recited, *"'That you may die within the hour.'* Of course I remember."

"Hour?" Sunny said fearfully from inside her helmet.

"Shush," Violet said. "Save your breath, Sunny. We'll find a way to cure you right away."

"Not right away," Klaus corrected sadly. "Fiona is the captain now, and she ordered us—"

"I don't care about Fiona's orders," Violet said. "She's too volatile to get us out of this situation—just like her stepfather, and just like her brother!" The eldest Baudelaire reached into the pocket of her uniform and drew out the newspaper clipping she had taken from the grotto. Her hand brushed against the tin of wasabi, and she shivered, hoping that her sister would recuperate and live to use the Japanese condiment in one of her recipes. “Listen to this, Klaus!”

“I don’t want to listen!” Klaus said in an angry whisper. “Maybe Fiona is right! Maybe we shouldn’t hesitate, particularly at a time like this! If we don’t get an antidote to our sister, she might perish! Hesitating will only make things worse!”

“Firing up the engines, instead of helping Fiona with her research, will only make things worse!” Violet said.

At that moment, however, both Violet and Klaus saw something that made things worse, and they realized that they both had been wrong. The two Baudelaires shouldn’t have been firing up the engines of the *Queequeg*, and they shouldn’t have been helping Fiona with her research, and they shouldn’t have been arguing with one another. The Baudelaires, and Fiona, too, should have been standing very still, trying not to make even the smallest noise, and instead of looking at the diving helmet, where their sister was suffering under the poison of the Medusoid Mycelium, they should have been looking at the submarine’s sonar detector, or out of the porthole over the table, which looked out into the dark depths of the cave. On the green panel was the glowing Q, representing the *Queequeg*, but this was another thing in the world that was difficult to see, because another glowing green symbol was occupying the very same space. And outside the porthole was a mass of small, metal tubes, circling in the gloomy water and making thousands and thousands of bubbles, and in the middle of all those tubes was a large, open space, like a gigantic hungry mouth—the mouth of an octopus, about to devour the *Queequeg* and all its remaining crew. The image on the sonar detector, of course, was an eye, and the view from the porthole was of a submarine, but either way the children knew it was Count Olaf, and that made things much, much worse indeed.

CHAPTER
Nine

If you are considering a life of villainy—and I certainly hope that you are not—there are a few things that appear to be necessary to every villain's success. One thing is a villainous disregard for other people, so that a villain may talk to his or her victims impolitely, ignore their pleas for mercy, and even behave violently toward them if the villain is in the mood for that sort of thing. Another thing villains require is a villainous imagination, so that they might spend their free time dreaming up treacherous schemes in order to further their villainous careers. Villains require a small group of villainous cohorts, who can be persuaded to serve the villain in a henchpersonal capacity. And villains need to develop a villainous laugh, so that they may simultaneously celebrate their villainous deeds and frighten whatever nonvillainous people happen to be nearby. A successful villain should have all of these things at his or her villainous fingertips, or else give up villainy altogether and try to lead a life of decency, integrity, and kindness, which is much more challenging and noble, if not always quite as exciting.

Count Olaf, of course, was an excellent villain, a phrase which here means "someone particularly skilled at villainy" rather than "a villain with several desirable qualities," and the Baudelaire orphans had known this soon after that terrible day at Briny Beach, when the children learned of the terrible fire that began so many of the unfortunate events in their lives. But as the *Queequeg* tumbled into the mouth of his dreadful octopus submarine, it seemed to the orphans that the villain had become even more villainous during his brief absence from their lives. Olaf had proven his villainous disregard for other people over and over, from his vicious murder of the children's guardians to his affinity for arson, a phrase which here means "enthusiasm for burning down buildings, no matter how many people were inside," but the children realized that Olaf's disregard had become even more dreadful, as the *Queequeg* passed through the gaping mouth and was roughly tossed from side to side in a mechanical imitation of swallowing, forcing Violet and Klaus—and Fiona, too, of course—to hang on for dear life as the Main Hall rolled this way and that, spinning Sunny in her helmet like a water-melon in a washing machine. The count had displayed his villainous imagination on a number of occasions, from his dastardly schemes to steal the Baudelaire fortune to his nefarious plots to kidnap Duncan and Isadora Quagmire, but the siblings gazed out of the porthole and saw that Olaf's infernal imagination had run utterly wild in decorating this terrible submarine, for the *Queequeg* rolled along a rumbling tunnel that was almost as dark and threatening as the Gorgonian Grotto, with every inch of its metallic walls covered in eerie glowing eyes. The count always had an assortment of cohorts, from his original theatrical troupe—many of whom were no longer with him—to some former employees of Caligari Carnival, but the orphans saw that he had lured many others to join him when the tunnel rounded a corner and the elder Baudelaires had a brief glimpse of an enormous room full of people rowing long, metal oars, activating the terrible metal arms of the octopus. And, perhaps worst of all, when the *Queequeg* finally came to a shuddering stop and Violet and Klaus looked out of the porthole, they learned that the villain had clearly been rehearsing his villainous laugh until it was extra wicked and more theatrical than ever. Count Olaf was standing on a small, metal platform with a triumphant grin on his face, dressed in a familiar suit made of slippery-looking material, but with a portrait of another author whom only a very devoted reader would recognize, and when he peered through the porthole and spied the frightened children, he opened his mouth and began his new villainous laugh, which included new wheezes, bonus snarls, and an assortment of strange syllables the Baudelaires had never heard.

“Ha ha ha heepa-heepa ho!” he cried. “Tee hee tort tort tort! Hot cha ha ha! Sniggle hee! Ha, if I do say so myself!” With a boastful gesture, he hopped off the platform, drew a long, sharp sword, and quickly traced a circle on the glass of the porthole. Violet and Klaus covered their ears as the sword shrieked its way around the window. Then, with one flick of his sword, Olaf sent the glass circle tumbling into the Main Hall, where it lay unbroken on the floor, and leaped through the porthole onto the large, wooden table to laugh at them further. “I’m splitting my sides!” he cried. “I’m rolling in the aisles! I’m nauseous with mirth! I’m rattling with glee! I’m seriously considering compiling a joke book from all of the hilarious things bouncing around my brain! Hup hup ha ha hammy hee hee!”

Violet dashed forward and grabbed the helmet in which Sunny was still curled, so Olaf would not kick it as he pranced triumphantly on top of the table. She could not bear to think of her sister, who was inhaling the poison of the Medusoid Mycelium as Olaf wasted precious minutes performing his tiresome new laugh. “Stop laughing, Count Olaf,” she said. “There’s nothing funny about villainy.”

“Sure there is!” Olaf crowed. “Ha ha hat rack! Just think of it! I made my way down the mountain and found pieces of your toboggan scattered all over some very sharp rocks! Tee hee torpid sniggle! I thought you had drowned in the Stricken Stream and were swimming with all those coughing fishes! Ho ho hagfish! I was brokenhearted!”

“You weren’t brokenhearted,” Klaus said. “You’ve tried to destroy us plenty of times.”

“That’s why I was brokenhearted!” Olaf cried. “Ho ho sniggle! I personally planned to slaughter you Baudelaires myself, after I had your fortune of course, and pry the sugar bowl out of your dead fingers or toes!”

Violet and Klaus looked at one another hurriedly. They had almost forgotten telling Olaf that they knew the location of the sugar bowl, even though they of course had no idea of its whereabouts. “To cheer myself up,” the villain continued, “I met my associates at the Hotel Denouement, where they were cooking up a little scheme of their own, and convinced them to lend me a handful of our new recruits.” The elder Baudelaires knew that the associates were the man with a beard and no hair, and the woman with hair but no beard, two people so sinister that even Olaf seemed to find them a bit frightening, and that the new recruits were a group of Snow Scouts that these villains had recently kidnapped. “Tee hee turncoat! Thanks to their generosity, I was able to get this submarine working again! Sniggle ha ho ho! Of course, I need to be back at the Hotel Denouement before Thursday, but in the meantime I had a few days to kill, so I thought I’d kill some of my old enemies! Hee hee halbert sniggle! So I began roaming around the sea, looking for Captain Widdershins and his idiotic submarine on my sonar detector! Tee hee telotaxis! But now that I’ve captured the *Queequeg*, I find you Baudelaires aboard! It’s hilarious! It’s humorous! It’s droll! It’s relatively amusing!”

“How dare you capture this submarine!” Fiona cried. “I’m the captain of the *Queequeg*, and I demand that you return us to the sea at once! Aye!”

Count Olaf peered down at the mycologist. *“Aye?”* he repeated. “You must be Fiona, that little fungus freak! Why, you’re all grown up! The last time I saw you I was trying to throw thumbtacks into your cradle! Ha ha hoi polloi! What happened to Widdershins? Why isn’t he the captain?”

“My stepfather is not around at the moment,” Fiona replied, blinking behind her triangular glasses.

“Tee hee terry cloth!” Count Olaf said. “Your stepfather has abandoned you, eh? Well, I suppose it was only a matter of time. Your whole family could never choose which side of the schism was theirs. Your brother used to be a goody-goody as well, trying to prevent fires instead of encouraging them, but eventually—”

“My stepfather has not abandoned me,” Fiona said, though her voice faltered a bit, a phrase which here means “sounded as if she weren’t so sure.” She did not even add an “Aye!” to her sentence.

“We’ll see about that,” Olaf said, grinning wickedly. “I’m going to lock all of you in the brig, which is the official seafaring term for ‘jail.’”

“We know what the brig is,” Klaus said.

“Then you know it’s not a very pleasant place,” the villain said. “The previous owner used it to hold traitors captive, and I see no reason to break with tradition.”

“We’re not traitors, and we’re not leaving the *Queequeg,*” Violet said, and held up the diving helmet. Sunny tried to say something, but the growing fungus made her cough instead, and Olaf frowned at the coughing helmet.

“What’s that?” he demanded

“Sunny is in here,” she said. “And she’s very ill.”

“I was wondering where the baby brat was,” Count Olaf said. “I was hoping she was trapped underneath my shoe, but I see that it’s just some ridiculous book.” He lifted his slippery foot to reveal *Mushroom Minutiae,* the book Fiona had been using for her research, and kicked it off the table where it skittered into a far corner.

“There is a very deadly poison inside that helmet,” Fiona said, staring at the book in frustration. “Aye! If Sunny doesn’t receive an antidote within the hour, she will perish.”

“What do I care?” Olaf growled, once again showing his villainous disregard for other people. “I only need one Baudelaire to get my hands on the fortune. Now come with me! Ha ha handiwork!”

“We’re staying right here,” Klaus said. “Our sister’s life depends on it.”

Count Olaf drew his sword again, and traced a sinister shape in the air. “I’ll tell you what your lives depend on,” he said. “Your lives depend on me! If I wanted, I could drown you in the sea, or have you strangled by the arms of the mechanical octopus! It’s only out of the kindness of my heart, and because of my own greed, that I’m locking you in the brig instead!”

Sunny coughed inside her helmet, and Violet thought quickly. “If you let us help our sister,” she said, “we’ll tell you where the sugar bowl is.”

Count Olaf's eyes narrowed, and he gave the children a wide, toothy grin the two Baudelaires remembered from so many of their troubled times. His eyes shone brightly, as if he were telling a joke as nasty as his unbrushed teeth. "You can't try that trick again," he sneered. "I'm not going to bargain with an orphan, no matter how pretty she may be. Once you get to the brig, you'll reveal where the sugar bowl is—once my henchman gets his hands on you. Or should I say *hooks*? Tee hee torture!"

Count Olaf leaped back through the porthole as Violet and Klaus looked at one another in fear. They knew Count Olaf was referring to the hook-handed man, who had been working with the villain as long as they had known him and was one of their least favorite of Olaf's comrades. "I could race up the rope ladder," Violet murmured to the others, "and fire up the engines of the *Queequeg.*"

"We can't take the submarine underwater with the window gone," Fiona said. "We'd drown."

Klaus put his ear to the diving helmet, and heard his sister whimper, and then cough. "But how can we save Sunny?" he asked. "Time is running out."

Fiona eyed the far corner of the room. "I'll take that book with me," she said, "and—"

"Hurry up!" Count Olaf cried. "I can't stand around all day! I have plenty of people to boss around!"

"Aye!" Fiona said, as Violet, still holding Sunny, led Klaus through the porthole to join Count Olaf on the platform. "I'll be there in a second," she said, and the mycologist took one hesitant step toward *Mushroom Minutiae.*

"You'll be there *now*!" Olaf growled, and shook his sword at her. "He who hesitates is lost! Hee hee sniggle!"

At the mention of the captain's personal philosophy, Fiona sighed, and stopped her furtive journey—a phrase which here means "sneaking"—

toward the mycological book. “Or she,” she said quietly, and stepped through the porthole to join the Baudelaires.

“On the way to the brig, I’ll give you the grand tour!” Olaf announced, leading the way out of the round, metal room that was serving as a sort of brig for the *Queequeg* itself. There were several inches of water on the floor, to help the captured submarine move through the tunnel, and the Baudelaires’ boots made loud, wet splashes as they followed the boasting villain. While Sunny coughed again in her helmet, Olaf pressed an eye on the wall, and a small door slid open with a sinister whisper to reveal a corridor. “This submarine is one of the greatest things I’ve ever stolen,” he bragged. “It has everything I’ll need to defeat V.F.D. once and for all. It has a sonar system, so I can rid the seas of V.F.D. submarines. It has an enormous flyswatter, so I can rid the skies of V.F.D. planes. It has a lifetime supply of matches, so I can rid the world of V.F.D. headquarters. It has several cases of wine that I plan to drink up myself, and a closet full of very stylish outfits for my girlfriend. And best of all, it has plenty of opportunities for children to do hard labor! Ha ha hedonism!”

Gesturing with his sword, he led the children around a corner into an enormous room—the room they’d had a glimpse of as the *Queequeg* tumbled inside this terrible place. It was quite dark, with only a few lanterns hanging from the tops of tall pillars scattered around the room, but Violet and Klaus could see two large rows of uncomfortable-looking wooden benches, on which sat a crowd of children, hurriedly working long oars that stretched across the room and even beyond the walls, where they slid through metal holes in order to control the tentacles of the octopus. The elder Baudelaires recognized some of the children from a troop of Snow Scouts they had encountered in the Mortmain Mountains, and a few looked quite a bit like other students at Prufrock Preparatory School, where the siblings had first encountered Carmelita Spats, but some of the others were children with whom the Baudelaires had had no prior experience, a phrase which here means “who had probably been kidnapped by Count Olaf or his associates on another occasion.” The children looked very weary, quite hungry, and more than a little bored as they worked the metal oars back and forth. In the very center of the room appeared to be another octopus—this one made of slippery cloth. Six of the octopus’s arms hung limply at its sides, but two of them were waving high in the air, one of them clutching what looked like a long, damp noodle.

“Row faster, you stupid brats!” the octopus cried in a familiar, wicked voice. “We have to get back to the Hotel Denouement before Thursday, and it’s Monday already! If you don’t hurry up I’m going to hit you with this tagliatelle grande! I warn you, being struck with a large piece of pasta is an unpleasant and somewhat sticky experience! Ho ho sniggle!”

“Hee hee snaggle!” Olaf cried in agreement, and the octopus whirled around.

“Darling!” it cried, and the siblings were not surprised to see that it was Esmé Squalor, Count Olaf’s treacherous girlfriend, in another one of her absurd, stylish outfits. Using the slippery cloth of the submarine’s uniforms, the villainous girlfriend had fashioned an octopus dress, with two large plastic eyes, six extra sleeves, and suction cups stuck all over her boots, just as real octopi have on their tentacles to help them move around. Esmé took a few sticky steps toward Olaf and then peered at the children beneath the slippery hood of the dress. “Are these the *Baudelaires*?” she asked in astonishment. “How can that be? We already celebrated their deaths!”

“It turns out they survived,” Count Olaf said, “but their good luck is about to come to an end. I’m taking them to the brig!”

“The baby certainly has grown,” Esmé said, peering at Fiona. “But she’s just as ugly as she ever was.”

“No, no,” Olaf said. “The baby’s locked up in that helmet, coughing her little lungs out. This is Fiona, Captain Widdershin’s stepdaughter. The captain abandoned her!”

“Abandoned her?” Esmé repeated. “How in! How stylish! How marvelous! This calls for more of our new laughter! Ha ha hedgehog!”

“Tee hee tempeh!” Olaf cackled. “Life keeps getting better and better!”

“Sniggle ho ho!” Esmé shrieked. “Our triumph is just around the corner!”

“Ha ha Hepplewhite!” Olaf crowed. “V.F.D. will be reduced to ashes forever!”

“Giggle giggle glandular problems!” Esmé cried. “We are going to be painfully wealthy!”

“Heepa deepa ho ho ha!” Olaf shouted. “The world will always remember the name of this wonderful submarine!”

“What is the name of this submarine?” Fiona asked, and to the children’s relief the villains stopped their irritating laughter. Olaf glared at the mycologist and then looked at the ground.

“The *Carmelita,*” he admitted quietly. “I wanted to call it the *Olaf*, but somebody made me change it.”

“The *Olaf* is a cakesniffing name!” cried a rude voice the siblings had hoped never to hear again, and I’m sorry to say that Carmelita Spats skipped into the room, sneering at the Baudelaires as she did so. Carmelita had always been the sort of unpleasant person who believed that she was prettier and smarter than everybody else, and Violet and Klaus saw instantly that she had become even more spoiled under the care of Olaf and Esmé. She was dressed in an outfit perhaps even more absurd than Esmé Squalor’s, in different shades of pink so blinding that Violet and Klaus had to squint in order to look at her. Around her waist was a wide, frilly tutu, which is a skirt used during ballet performances, and on her head was an enormous pink crown decorated with light pink ribbons and dark pink flowers. She had two pink wings taped to her back, two pink hearts drawn on her cheeks, and two different pink shoes on each foot that made unpleasant slapping sounds as she walked. Around her neck was a stethoscope, such as doctors use, with pink puffballs pasted all over it, and in one hand she had a long pink wand with a bright pink star at the end of it.

“Stop looking at my outfit!” she commanded the Baudelaires scornfully. “You’re just jealous of me because I’m a tap-dancing ballerina fairy princess veterinarian!"

"You look adorable, darling," purred Esmé, patting her on the crown. "Doesn't she look adorable, Olaf?"

"I suppose so," Count Olaf muttered. "I wish you would ask me before taking disguises from my trunk."

"But Countie, I needed your disguises," Carmelita whined, batting her eyelashes, which were covered in pink glitter. "I needed a special outfit for my special tap-dancing ballerina fairy princess veterinarian dance recital!"

Several of the children groaned at their oars. "Please, no!" cried one of the Snow Scouts. "Her dance recitals last for hours!"

"Have mercy on us!" cried another child.

"Carmelita Spats is the most talented dancer in the entire universe!" Esmé growled, snapping the noodle over the rower's heads. "You brats should be grateful that she is performing for you! It'll help you row!"

"Ugh," Sunny could not help saying from inside her helmet, as if the idea of Carmelita's dance recital were making her even sicker. The elder Baudelaires looked at one another and tried to imagine how they could help their young sibling. "I think we have a pink cape aboard the *Queequeg*," Klaus said hurriedly. "It would look perfect on Carmelita. I'll just run back to the submarine, and—"

"I don't want your old clothes, you cakesniffer!" Carmelita said scornfully. "A tap-dancing ballerina fairy princess veterinarian doesn't wear hand-me-downs!"

"Isn't she precious?" Esmé cooed. "She's like the adopted child I never had—except for you Baudelaires, of course. But I never liked you much."

"Are you going to stay and watch me, Countie?" Carmelita asked. "This is going to be the most special dance recital in the whole wide world!"

“There’s too much work to do,” Count Olaf said hastily. “I have to throw these children in the brig, so my associate can force them to reveal the location of the sugar bowl.”

“You like that sugar bowl more than me,” Carmelita pouted.

“Of course we don’t, darling,” Esmé said. “Olaf, tell her that sugar bowl doesn’t mean a thing to you! Tell her she’s like a wonderful marshmallow in the middle of our lives!”

“You’re a marshmallow, Carmelita,” Olaf said, and pushed the children out of the enormous room. “I’ll see you later.”

“Tell Hooky to be extra vicious with those brats!” Esmé cried, whipping the tagliatelle grande over her fake octopus head. “And now, on with the show!”

Count Olaf ushered the children out of the room as Carmelita Spats began tapping and twirling in front of the rowers. The elder Baudelaires were almost grateful to go to the brig, rather than being forced to watch a tap-dancing ballerina fairy princess veterinarian dance recital. Olaf dragged them down another hallway that twisted every which way, curving to the right and to the left as if it were a snake the mechanical octopus had eaten, and finally stopped in front of a small door, with a metal eye where the doorknob ought to have been.

“This is the brig!” Count Olaf cried. “Ha ha haberdashery!”

Sunny coughed once more from inside her helmet—a rough, loud cough that sounded worse than before. The Medusoid Mycelium was clearly continuing its ghastly growth, and Violet tried one more time to convince the villain to let them help her. “Please let us go back to the *Queequeg*,” she said. “Can’t you hear her coughing?”

“Yes,” Count Olaf said, “but I don’t care.”

“Please!” Klaus cried. “This is a matter of life and death!”

“It certainly is,” Olaf sneered, turning the knob. “My associate will make you reveal the location of the sugar bowl if he has to tear you apart to do it!”

“Listen to my friends!” Fiona said. “Aye! We’re in a terrible situation!”

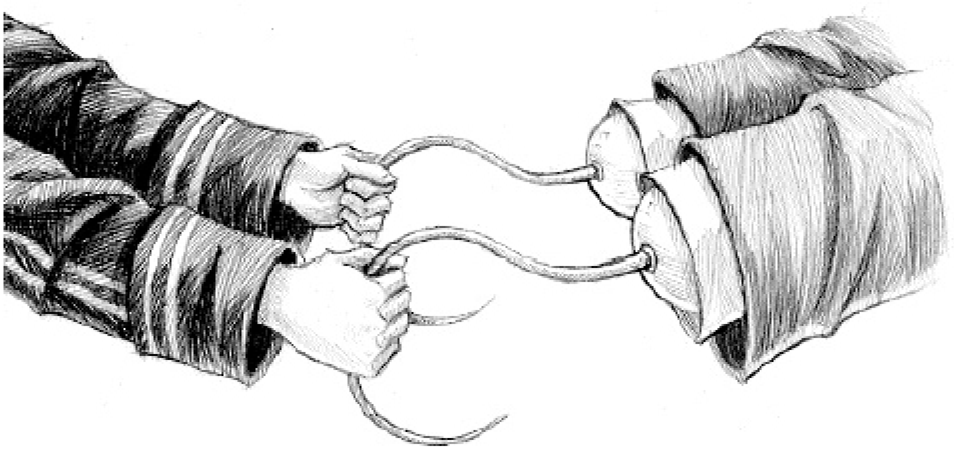
“Oh, I wouldn’t say that,” Count Olaf said, with a wicked smile, as the door creaked open to reveal a small, bare room. There was nothing in it but a small stool, at which a man sat, shuffling a deck of cards with quite a bit of difficulty. “How can a family reunion be a terrible situation?” Olaf said, and shoved the children inside the room, slamming the door behind them.

Violet and Klaus faced Olaf’s associate, and turned the diving helmet so Sunny could face him, too. The siblings were not surprised, of course, that the person shuffling the cards was the hook-handed man, and they were not at all happy to see him, and they were quite scared that their time in the brig would make it impossible to save Sunny from the mushrooms growing inside her helmet. But when they looked at Fiona, they saw that the mycologist was quite surprised at who she saw in the brig, and quite happy to see the man who stood up from his stool and waved his hooks in amazement.

“Fiona!” the hook-handed man cried.

“Fernald!” Fiona said, and it seemed they just might save Sunny after all.

CHAPTER
Ten



The way sadness works is one of the strange riddles of the world. If you are stricken with a great sadness, you may feel as if you have been set aflame, not only because of the enormous pain, but also because your sadness may spread over your life, like smoke from an enormous fire. You might find it difficult to see anything but your own sadness, the way smoke can cover a landscape so that all anyone can see is black. You may find that happy things are tainted with sadness, the way smoke leaves its ashen colors and scents on everything it touches. And you may find that if someone pours water all over you, you are damp and distracted, but not cured of your sadness, the way a fire department can douse a fire but never recover what has been burnt down. The Baudelaire orphans, of course, had had a great sadness in their life from the moment they first heard of their parents' death, and sometimes it felt as if they had to wave smoke away from their eyes to see even the happiest of moments. As Violet and Klaus watched Fiona and the hook-handed man embrace one another, they felt as if the smoke of their own unhappiness had filled the brig. They could not bear to think that Fiona had found her long-lost brother when they themselves, in all likelihood, would never see their parents again, and might even lose their sister as the poisonous spores of the Medusoid Mycelium made her coughing sound worse and worse inside the helmet.

“Fiona!” the hook-handed man cried. “Is it really you?”

“Aye,” the mycologist said, taking off her triangular glasses to wipe away her tears. “I never thought I would see you again, Fernald. What happened to your hands?”

“Never mind that,” the hook-handed man said quickly. “Why are you here? Did you join Count Olaf, too?”

“Certainly not,” Fiona said firmly. “He captured the *Queequeg*, and threw us into the brig.”

“So you’ve joined the Baudelaire brats,” the hook-handed man said. “I should have known you were a goody-goody!”

“I haven’t joined the Baudelaires,” Fiona said, just as firmly. “They’ve joined me. Aye! I’m the captain of the *Queequeg* now.”

“You?” said Olaf’s henchman. “What happened to Widdershins?”

“He disappeared from the submarine,” Fiona replied. “We don’t know where he is.”

“I don’t care where he is,” the hook-handed man sneered. “I couldn’t care less about that mustached fool! He’s the reason I joined Count Olaf in the first place! The captain was always shouting ‘Aye! Aye! Aye!’ and ordering me around! So I ran away and joined Olaf’s acting troupe!”

“But Count Olaf is a terrible villain!” Fiona cried. “He has no regard for other people. He dreams up treacherous schemes, and lures others into becoming his cohorts!”

“Those are just the bad aspects of him,” the hook-handed man said. “There are many good parts, as well. For instance, he has a wonderful laugh.”

“A wonderful laugh is no excuse for villainous behavior!” Fiona said.

“Let’s just agree to disagree,” the hook-handed man replied, using a tiresome expression which here means “You’re probably right, but I’m too embarrassed to admit it.” He waved one hook carelessly at his sister. “Step aside, Fiona. It’s time for the orphans to tell me where the sugar bowl is.”

Olaf’s henchman scraped his hooks together to give them a quick sharpening, and took one threatening step toward the Baudelaires. Violet and Klaus looked at one another in fear, and then at the diving helmet, where they heard their sister give another shuddering cough, and knew that it was time to lay their cards on the table, a phrase which here means “reveal themselves honestly to Olaf’s wicked henchman.”

“We don’t know where the sugar bowl is,” Violet said.

“My sister is telling the truth,” Klaus said. “Do with us what you will, but we won’t be able to tell you anything.”

The hook-handed man glared at them, and scraped his hooks together once more. “You’re liars,” he said. “Both of you are rotten orphan *liars*.”

“It’s true, Fernald,” Fiona said. “Aye! Finding the sugar bowl was the *Queequeg*’s mission, but so far we’ve failed.”

“If you don’t know where the sugar bowl is,” the hook-handed man said angrily, “then putting you in the brig is completely pointless!” He turned around and kicked his small stool, toppling it over, and then kicked the wall of the brig for good measure. “What am I supposed to do now?” he sulked.

Fiona put her hand on her brother’s hook. “Take us back to the *Queequeg,*” she said. “Sunny is in that helmet, along with a growth of Medusoid Mycelium.”

“Medusoid Mycelium?” Olaf’s henchman repeated in horror. “That’s a very dangerous fungus!”

“She’s in great danger,” Violet said. “If we don’t find a cure very, very soon, she’ll die.”

The hook-handed man frowned, but then looked at the helmet and gave the children a shrug. “Why should I care if she dies?” he asked. “She’s made my life miserable from the time I met her. Every time we fail to get the Baudelaire fortune, Count Olaf yells at everyone!”

“You’re the one who made the Baudelaires’ lives miserable,” Fiona said. “Count Olaf has performed countless treacherous schemes, and you helped him time and time again. Aye! You ought to be ashamed of yourself.”

The hook-handed man sighed, and looked down at the floor of the brig. “Sometimes I am,” he admitted. “Life in Olaf’s troupe sounded like it was going to be glamorous and fun, but we’ve ended up doing more murder, arson, blackmail, and assorted violence than I would have preferred.”

“This is your chance to do something noble,” Fiona said. “You don’t have to remain on the wrong side of the schism.”

“Oh, Fiona,” the hook-handed man said, and put one hook awkwardly around her shoulder. “You don’t understand. There is no wrong side of the schism.”

“Of course there is,” Klaus said. “V.F.D. is a noble organization, and Count Olaf is a terrible villain.”

“A noble organization?” the hook-handed man said. “Is that so? Tell that to your baby sister, you four-eyed fool! If it weren’t for Volatile Fungus Deportation, you never would have encountered those deadly mushrooms!”

The children looked at one another, remembering what they had read in the Gorgonian Grotto. They had to admit that Olaf’s henchman was right. But Violet reached into her pocket and drew out the newspaper clipping Sunny had found in the cave. She held it out so everyone could see the

Daily Punctilio article that the eldest Baudelaire had kept hidden for so long.

"'VERIFYING FERNALD'S DEFECTION,'" she said, reading the headline out loud, and then continued by reading the byline, a word which here means "name of the person who wrote the article." "'By Jacques Snicket. It has now been confirmed that the fire that destroyed Anwhistle Aquatics, and took the life of famed ichnologist Gregor Anwhistle, was set by Fernald Widdershins, the son of the captain of the *Queequeg* submarine. The Widdershins family's participation in a recent schism has raised several questions regarding…'" Violet looked up and met the glare of Olaf's henchman. "The rest of the article is blurry," she said, "but the truth is clear. You defected—you abandoned V.F.D. and joined up with Olaf!"

"The difference between the two sides of the schism," Klaus said, "is that one side puts out fires, and the other starts them."

The hook-handed man reached forward and speared the article on one of his hooks, and then turned the clipping around so he could read it again. "You should have seen the fire," he said quietly. "From a distance, it looked like an enormous black plume of smoke, rising straight out of the water. It was like the entire sea was burning down."

"You must have been proud of your handiwork," Fiona said bitterly.

"Proud?" the hook-handed man said. "It was the worst day of my life. That plume of smoke was the saddest thing I ever saw." He speared the newspaper with his other hook and ripped the article into shreds. "The *Punctilio* got everything wrong," he said. "Captain Widdershins isn't my father. Widdershins isn't my last name. And there's much more to the fire than that. You should know that the *Daily Punctilio* doesn't tell the whole story, Baudelaires. Just as the poison of a deadly fungus can be the source of some wonderful medicines, someone like Jacques Snicket can do something villainous, and someone like Count Olaf can do something noble. Even your parents—"

"Our stepfather knew Jacques Snicket," Fiona said. "He was a good man, but Count Olaf murdered him. Are you a murderer, too? Did you kill

Gregor Anwhistle?"

In grim silence, the hook-handed man held his hooks in front of the children. "The last time you saw me," he said to Fiona, "I had two hands, instead of hooks. Our stepfather probably didn't tell you what happened to me—he always said there were secrets in this world too terrible for young people to know. What a fool!"

"Our stepfather isn't a fool," Fiona said. "He's a noble man. Aye!"

"People aren't either wicked or noble," the hook-handed man said. "They're like chef's salads, with good things and bad things chopped and mixed together in a vinaigrette of confusion and conflict." He turned to the two elder Baudelaires and pointed at them with his hooks. "Look at yourselves, Baudelaires. Do you really think we're so different? When those eagles carried me away from the mountains in that net, I saw the ruins of that fire in the hinterlands—a fire we started together. You've burned things down, and so have I. You joined the crew of the *Queequeg*, and I joined the crew of the *Carmelita*. Our captains are both volatile people, and we're both trying to get to the Hotel Denouement before Thursday. The only difference between us is the portraits on our uniforms."

"We're wearing Herman Melville," Klaus said. "He was a writer of enormous talent who dramatized the plight of overlooked people, such as poor sailors or exploited youngsters, through his strange, often experimental philosophical prose. I'm proud to display his portrait. But you're wearing Edgar Guest. He was a writer of limited skill, who wrote awkward, tedious poetry on hopelessly sentimental topics. You ought to be ashamed of yourself."

"Edgar Guest isn't my favorite poet," the hook-handed man admitted. "Before I joined up with Count Olaf, I was studying poetry with my stepfather. We used to read to one another in the Main Hall of the *Queequeg*. But it's too late now. I can't return to my old life."

"Maybe not," Klaus said. "But you can return us to the *Queequeg,* so we can save Sunny."

"Please," the children heard Sunny say, from inside the helmet, although her voice was quite hoarse, as if she would not be able to speak for much longer, and for a moment the only sound in the brig was Sunny's desperate coughing as the minutes in her crucial hour ticked away, and the muttering of the hook-handed man as he paced back and forth, twiddling his hooks in thought. Violet and Klaus watched his hooks, and thought of all the times he had used them to threaten the siblings. It is one thing to believe that people have both good and bad inside them, mixed together like ingredients in a salad bowl. But it is quite another to look at a cohort of a despicable villain, who has tried again and again to cause so much harm, and try to see where the good parts are buried, when all you can remember is the pain and suffering he has caused. As the hook-handed man circled the brig, it was as if the Baudelaires were picking through a chef's salad consisting mostly of dreadful—and perhaps even poisonous—ingredients, trying desperately to find the one noble crouton that might save their sister, just as I, between paragraphs, am picking through this salad in front of me, hoping that my waiter is more noble than wicked, and that my sister, Kit, might be saved by the small, herbed piece of toast I hope to retrieve from my bowl. After much hemming and hawing, however—a phrase which here means "muttering, and clearing of one's throat, used to avoid making a quick decision"—Count Olaf's henchman stopped in front of the children, put his hooks on his hips, and offered them a Hobson's choice.

"I'll return you to the *Queequeg,*" he said, "if you take me with you."

CHAPTER
Eleven

“Aye!” Fiona said. “Aye! Aye! Aye! We’ll take you with us, Fernald! Aye!”

Violet and Klaus looked at one another. They were grateful, of course, that the hook-handed man was letting them save Sunny from the Medusoid Mycelium, but they couldn’t help but wish Fiona had uttered fewer “Aye!” s. Inviting Count Olaf’s henchman to join them on the *Queequeg*, even if he was Fiona’s long-lost brother, seemed like a decision they might regret.

“I’m so glad,” the hook-handed man said, giving the two siblings a smile they found inscrutable, a word which here means “either pleasant or nasty, but it was hard to tell.” “I have lots of ideas about where we could go after we get off the *Carmelita.*”

“Well, I’d certainly like to hear them,” Fiona said. “Aye!”

“Perhaps we could discuss such things later,” Violet said. “I don’t think now is a good time to hesitate.”

“Aye!” Fiona said. “She who hesitates is lost!”

"Or he," Klaus reminded her. "We've got to get to the *Queequeg* right away."

The hook-handed man opened the door of the brig and looked up and down the corridor. "This will be tricky," he said, beckoning to the children with one of his hooks. "The only way back to the *Queequeg* is through the rowing room, but that room is filled with children we've kidnapped. Esmé took my tagliatelle grande and is whipping them so they'll row faster."

The elder Baudelaires did not bother to point out that the hook-handed man had threatened the Baudelaires with the very same noodle, when the children had worked at Caligari Carnival, along with a few other individuals who had ended up joining Olaf's troupe. "Is there any way to sneak past them?" Violet asked.

"We'll see," Olaf's henchman said. "Follow me."

The hook-handed man strode quickly down the empty corridor, with Fiona behind him and the two Baudelaires behind her, carrying the diving helmet in which Sunny still coughed. Violet and Klaus purposefully lagged behind so they might have a word with the mycologist.

"Fiona, are you sure you want to take him with us?" Klaus asked, leaning in close to murmur in her ear. "He's a very dangerous and volatile man."

"He's my brother," Fiona replied in a fierce whisper, "and I'm your captain. Aye! I'm in charge of the *Queequeg*, so I get to choose its crew."

"We know that," Violet said, "but we just thought you might want to reconsider."

"Never," Fiona said firmly. "With my stepfather gone, Fernald may be the only person I have left in my family. Would you ask me to abandon my own sibling?"

As if replying, Sunny coughed desperately from inside her helmet, and the elder Baudelaires knew that Fiona was right. "Of course we wouldn't," Klaus said.

“Stop muttering back there,” the hook-handed man ordered, as he led the children around another twist in the corridor. “We’re approaching the rowing room, and we don’t want anyone to hear us.”

The children stopped talking, but as the henchman stopped at the door to the rowing room, and held his hook over an eye on the wall which would open the door, Violet and Klaus could hear that there was no reason to be quiet. Even through the thick metal of the rowing room entrance, they could hear the loud, piercing voice of Carmelita Spats.

“For my third dance,” she was saying, “I will twirl around and around while all of you clap as hard as you can. It is a dance of celebration, in honor of the most adorable tap-dancing ballerina fairy princess veterinarian in the world!”

“Please, Carmelita,” begged the voice of a child. “We’ve been rowing for hours. Our hands are too sore to clap.”

There was a faint, damp sound, like someone dropping a washcloth, and the elder Baudelaires realized that Esmé was whipping the children with her enormous noodle. “You will participate in Carmelita’s recital,” the treacherous girlfriend announced, “or you will suffer the sting of my tagliatelle grande! Ha ha hoity-toity!”

“It’s not really a sting,” said one brave child. “It’s more of a mild, wet slap.”

“Shut up, cakesniffer!” Carmelita ordered, and the children heard the rustle of her pink tutu as she began to twirl. “Start clapping!” she shrieked, and then the children heard a sound they had never heard before.

There is nothing wicked about having a dreadful singing voice, any more than there is something wicked about having dreadful posture, dreadful cousins, or a dreadful pair of pants. Many noble and pleasant people have any number of these things, and there are even one or two kind individuals who have them all. But if you have something dreadful, and you force it upon someone else, then you have done something quite wicked indeed. If you force your wicked posture on someone, for instance, by leaning so far back that they are forced to carry you down the street, then you have wickedly ruined their afternoon walk, and if you force your dreadful cousins on someone, by dropping them off to play at their house so you can escape from their dreadful presences and spend some time alone, then you have wickedly ruined their entire day, and only a very wicked person indeed would force a dreadful pair of pants on the legs and lower torso of somebody else. But to force your dreadful singing voice on somebody, or even a crowd of people, is one of the world's most wicked crimes, and at that moment Carmelita Spats opened her mouth and afflicted the crew of the *Carmelita* with her wickedness. Carmelita's singing voice was loud, like a siren, and high-pitched, like a squeaky door, and extremely off-pitch, as if all of the notes in the musical scale were pushing up against one another, all trying to sound at the same time. Her singing voice was mushy, as if someone had filled her mouth with mashed potatoes before she sang, and filled with vibrato, which is the Italian term for a voice that wavers as it sings, as if someone were shaking Carmelita very vigorously as she began her song. Even the most dreadful of voices can be tolerated if it is performing a good song, but I'm sad to say that Carmelita Spats had written the song herself and that it was just as dreadful as her singing voice. Violet and Klaus were reminded of Prufrock Preparatory School, where they had first met Carmelita. The vice principal of the school, a tedious man named Nero, forced his students to listen to him play the violin for hours, and they realized this administrator must have had a powerful influence on Carmelita's creativity.

"C is for 'cute,'" Carmelita sang,

"A is for 'adorable'!

R is for 'ravishing'!

M is for 'gorgeous'!

E is for 'excellent'!

L is for 'lovable'!

I is for ‘I’m the best’!

T is for ‘talented’!

and A is for ‘a tap-dancing ballerina fairy princess veterinarian’!

Now let’s begin my whole wonderful song all over again!”

The song was so irritating, and sung so poorly, that Violet and Klaus almost felt as if they were being tortured after all, particularly as Carmelita kept on singing it, over and over and over.

“I can’t stand her voice,” Violet said. “It reminds me of the cawing of the V.F.D. crows.”

“I can’t stand the lyrics,” Klaus said. “Someone needs to tell her that ‘gorgeous’ does not begin with the letter M.”

“I can’t stand the brat,” the hook-handed man said bitterly. “She’s one of the reasons I’d like to leave. But this sounds like as good a time as any to try to sneak through this room. There are plenty of pillars to hide behind, and if we walk around the very edge, where each oar sticks through the wall into the tentacles of the octopus, we should be able to get to the other door—assuming everybody is watching Carmelita’s tap-dancing ballerina fairy princess veterinarian dance recital.”

“That seems like a very risky plan,” Violet said.

“This is no time to be a coward,” the hook-handed man growled.

“My sister is not a coward,” Klaus said. “She’s just being cautious.”

“There’s no time to be cautious!” Fiona said. “Aye! She who hesitates is lost! Aye! Or he! Let’s go!”

Without another word, the hook-handed man poked the eye on the wall, and the door slid open to reveal the enormous room. As Olaf’s comrade had predicted, the rowing children were all facing Carmelita, who was prancing and singing on one side of the room while Esmé watched with a proud smile on her face and a large noodle in one of her tentacles. With the hook-handed man and Fiona in the lead, the three Baudelaires—Sunny still in the diving helmet, of course—made their careful way around the outside of the room as Carmelita twirled around singing her absurd song. When Carmelita announced what C was for, the children ducked behind one of the pillars. When she told her listeners the meaning of A and R, the children crept past the moving oars, taking care not to trip. When she insisted that "gorgeous" began with M, Count Olaf's henchman pointed one of his hooks at a far door, and when Carmelita reached E and L, the children ducked behind another pillar, hoping the dim light of the lanterns would not give them away. When Carmelita announced that she was the best, and bragged about being talented, Esmé Squalor frowned and turned around, blinking underneath the fake eyes of her octopus outfit, and the children had to flatten themselves on the floor so the villainous girlfriend would not spot them, and when the tap-dancing ballerina fairy princess veterinarian found it necessary to remind her audience that she was, in fact, a tap-dancing ballerina fairy princess veterinarian, the two elder Baudelaires found themselves ahead of Fiona and the hook-handed man, hiding behind a pillar that was just a few feet from their destination. They were just about to inch their way toward the door when Carmelita began belting out the last line of her song—"belting out" is a phrase which here means "singing in a particularly loud and particularly irritating voice"—only to stop herself just as she was about to begin her whole wonderful song all over again.

"*C is for*—cakesniffers!" she shouted. "What are you doing here?"

Violet and Klaus froze, and then saw with relief that the terrible little girl was pointing scornfully at Fiona and the hook-handed man, who were standing awkwardly between two oars.

"How dare you, Hooky?" Esmé said, fingering her large noodle as if she wanted to strike him with it. "You're interrupting a very in recital by an unspeakably darling little girl!"

"I'm very sorry, your Esméness," the hook-handed man said, stepping forward to elaborately bow in front of the wicked girlfriend. "I would sooner lose both hands all over again than interrupt Carmelita when she's dancing."

“But you *did* interrupt me, you handicapped cakesniffer!” Carmelita pouted. “Now I have to start the entire recital all over again!”

“No!” cried one of the rowing children. “Anything but that! It’s torture!”

“Speaking of torture,” the hook-handed man said quickly, “I stopped by to see if I could borrow your tagliatelle grande. It’ll help me get the Baudelaires to reveal the location of the sugar bowl.”

Esmé frowned, and fingered the noodle with one tentacle. “I don’t really like to lend things,” she said. “It usually leads to people messing up my stuff.”

“Please, ma’am,” Fiona said. “We’re so close to learning the location of the sugar bowl. Aye! We just need to borrow your noodle, so we can return to the brig.”

“Why are you helping Hooky?” Esmé said. “I thought you were another goody-goody orphan.”

“Certainly not,” the hook-handed man said. “This is my sister, Fiona, and she’s joining the crew of the *Carmelita.*”

“Fiona isn’t a very in name,” Esmé said. “I think I’ll call her Triangle Eyes. Are you really willing to join us, Triangle Eyes?”

“Aye!” Fiona said. “Those Baudelaires are nothing but trouble.”

“Why are you still talking?” demanded Carmelita. “This is supposed to be my special tap-dancing ballerina fairy princess veterinarian dance recital time!”

“Sorry, darling,” Esmé said. “Hooky and Triangle Eyes, take this noodle and scram!”

The hook-handed man and his sister walked to the center of the room and stood directly in front of Esmé and Carmelita, offering a perfect opportunity for the elder Baudelaires to scram, a rude word which here means “slip out of the room unnoticed and walk down the shadowy hallway Olaf had led them down just a little while earlier.”

“Do you think Fiona will join us?” Violet asked.

“I don’t think so,” Klaus said. “They told Esmé they’d return to the brig, so they’ll have to go back the way we came.”

“You don’t think she’s really joining Olaf’s troupe, do you?” Violet said.

“Of course not,” Klaus said. “That was just to give us an opportunity to get out of the room. Fiona may be volatile, but she’s not *that* volatile.”

“Of course not,” Violet said, though she didn’t sound very sure.

“Of course not,” Klaus repeated, as another ragged cough came from inside the diving helmet. “Hang on, Sunny,” he called to his sister. “You’ll be cured in no time!” Although he tried to sound as confident as he could, the middle Baudelaire had no way of knowing if his words were true—although, I’m happy to say, they were.

“How are you going to cure Sunny,” Violet said, “without Fiona?”

“We’ll have to research it ourselves,” Klaus said firmly.

“We’ll never read her entire mycological library in time to make an antidote,” Violet said.

“We don’t have to read the entire library,” Klaus said, as they reached the door to the *Queequeg*’s brig. “I know just where to look.”

Sunny coughed again, and then began to wheeze, a word which here means “make a hoarse, whistling sound indicating that her throat was almost completely closed up.” The elder Baudelaires could hardly stop themselves from opening the helmet to comfort their sister, but they didn’t want to risk getting poisoned themselves. “I hope you’re right,” Violet said, pressing a metal eye on the wall. The door slid open and children hurried toward the broken porthole of the submarine. “Sunny’s hour must almost be up.”

Klaus nodded grimly, and jumped through the porthole onto the large wooden table. Although it had only been a short while since the children had left the *Queequeg,* the Main Hall felt as if it had been abandoned for years. The three balloons tied to the table legs were beginning to sag, the tidal charts Klaus had studied had fallen to the floor, and the glass circle Count Olaf had cut in the porthole still lay on the floor. But the middle Baudelaire ignored all of these objects, and picked up *Mushroom Minutiae* from the floor.

“This book should have information on the antidote,” he said, and turned immediately to the table of contents as Violet carried Sunny through the porthole into the submarine. “Chapter Thirty-Six, The Yeast of Beasts. Chapter Thirty-Seven, Morel Behavior in a Free Society. Chapter Thirty-Eight, Fungible Mold, Moldable Fungi. Chapter Thirty-Nine, Visitable Fungal Ditches. Chapter Forty, The Gorgonian Grotto.”

“That’s it!” Violet said. “Chapter Forty.”

Klaus flipped pages as Sunny gave another desperate wheeze, although I wish the middle Baudelaire could have had the time to return to some of those pages he flipped past. “‘The Gorgonian Grotto,’” he read, “‘located in propinquity to Anwhistle Aquatics, has appropriately wraithlike nomenclature—’”

“We know all that,” Violet said hurriedly. “Skip to the part about the mycelium.”

Klaus’s eyes scanned the page easily, having had much practice in skipping the parts of books he found less than helpful. “‘The Medusoid Mycelium has a unique conducive strategy of waxing—’”

“‘And waning,’” interrupted Violet, as Sunny’s wheezing continued to wax. “Skip to the part about the poison.”

"'As the poet says,'" Klaus read, "'A single spore has such grim power/That you may die within the hour. Is dilution simple? But of course!/Just one small dose of root of horse.'"

"'Root of horse'?" Violet repeated. "How can a horse have a root?"

"I don't know," Klaus said. "Usually antidotes are certain botanical extractions, like pollen from a flower, or the stem of a plant."

"Does 'dilution' mean the same thing as 'antidote'?" Violet asked, but before her brother could answer, Sunny wheezed again, and the diving helmet rocked back and forth as she struggled against the fungus. Klaus looked at the book he was holding, and then at his sister, and then reached into the waterproof pocket of his uniform.

"What are you doing?" Violet asked.

"Getting my commonplace book," Klaus replied. "I wrote down all the information on the history of Anwhistle Aquatics that we found in the grotto."

"We don't have time to look at your research!" Violet said. "We need to find an antidote this very minute! Fiona's right—He or she who hesitates is lost."

Klaus shook his head. "Not necessarily," he said, and flipped a page of his dark blue notebook. "If we take one moment to think, we might save our sister. Now, what did Kit Snicket write in that letter? Here it is: 'The poisonous fungus you insist on cultivating in the grotto will bring grim consequences for all of us. Our factory at Lousy Lane can provide some dilution of the mycelium's destructive respiratory capabilities….' That's it! V.F.D. was making something in a factory near Lousy Lane that could dilute the effects of the mycelium."

"Lousy Lane?" Violet said. "That was the road to Uncle Monty's house. It had a terrible smell, remember? It smelled like black pepper. No, not black pepper…"

Klaus looked at his commonplace book, and then at *Mushroom Minutiae*. “Horseradish,” he said quietly. “The road smelled like horseradish! ‘Root of horse’! Horseradish is the antidote!”

Violet was already striding to the kitchen. “Let’s hope Phil likes to cook with horseradish,” she said, and pushed open the door. Klaus picked up the wheezing helmet and followed her into the tiny kitchen. There was scarcely enough room for the children to stand in the small space between the stove, the refrigerator, and two wooden cabinets.

“The cabinets must serve as a pantry,” Klaus said, using a word which here means “place where antidotes are hopefully stored.” “Horseradish should be there—if he has it.”

The elder Baudelaires shuddered, not wanting to think about what would happen to Sunny if horseradish were not found on the shelves. Within moments, however, Violet and Klaus had to consider that very thing. Violet opened one cupboard, and Klaus opened another, but the children saw immediately that there was no horseradish. “Gum,” Violet said faintly. “Boxes and boxes of gum Phil brought from the lumbermill, and nothing else. Did you find anything, Klaus?”

Klaus pointed to a pair of small cans on one shelf of his cupboard, and held up a small paper bag. “Two cans of water chestnuts,” he said, “and a small bag of sesame seeds.” His fist closed tightly around the bag, and he blinked back tears behind his glasses. “What are we going to do?”

Sunny wheezed once more, a frantic whistle that reminded her siblings of a train’s lonely noise as it disappears into a tunnel. “Let’s check the refrigerator,” Violet said. “Maybe there’s horseradish in there.”

Klaus nodded, and opened the kitchen’s refrigerator, which was almost as bare as the pantry. On the top shelf were six small bottles of lemon-lime soda, which Phil had offered the children on their first night aboard the *Queequeg*. On the middle shelf was a small piece of white, soft cheese, wrapped up in a bit of wax paper. And on the bottom shelf was a large plate, on which was something that made the two siblings begin to cry.

“I forgot,” Violet said, tears running down her face.

“Me too,” Klaus said, taking the plate out of the refrigerator.

Phil had used the last of the kitchen’s provisions—a word which here means “cooking supplies”—to prepare a cake. It looked like a coconut cream cake, like Dr. Montgomery used to make, and the two siblings wondered if Sunny, even as a baby, had noticed enough about cooking to help Phil concoct such a dessert. The cake was heavily frosted, with bits of coconut mixed into the thick, creamy frosting, and spelled out in blue frosting on the top, in Phil’s perky, optimistic handwriting, were three words.

“Violet’s Fifteenth Date,” Klaus said numbly. “That’s what the balloons were for.”

“It was my fifteenth birthday,” Violet said. “I turned fifteen sometime when we were in the grotto, and I forgot all about it.”

“Sunny didn’t forget,” Klaus said. “She said she was planning a surprise, remember? We were going to return from our mission in the cave, and celebrate your birthday.”

Violet slunk to the floor, and lay her head against Sunny’s diving helmet. “What are we going to do?” she sobbed. “We can’t lose Sunny. We can’t lose her!”

“There must be something we can use,” Klaus said, “as a substitute for horseradish. What could it be?”

“I don’t know!” Violet cried. “I don’t know anything about cooking!”

“Neither do I!” Klaus said, crying as hard as his sister. “Sunny’s the one who knows!”

The two weeping Baudelaires looked at one another, and then steeled themselves, a phrase which here means “summoned up as much strength as they could.” Then, without another word, they opened the tiny door of

Sunny's helmet and quickly dragged their sister out, quickly shutting the door behind her so the fungus would not spread. At first, their sister looked completely unchanged, but when the wheezing young girl opened her mouth, they could see several gray stalks and caps of this horrible mushroom, splotched with black as if someone had poured ink into Sunny's mouth. Wheezing horribly, Sunny reached out her tiny arms to each of her siblings and grabbed their hands. She did not have to utter a word. Violet and Klaus knew she was begging for help, but there was nothing they could do except ask her one desperate question.

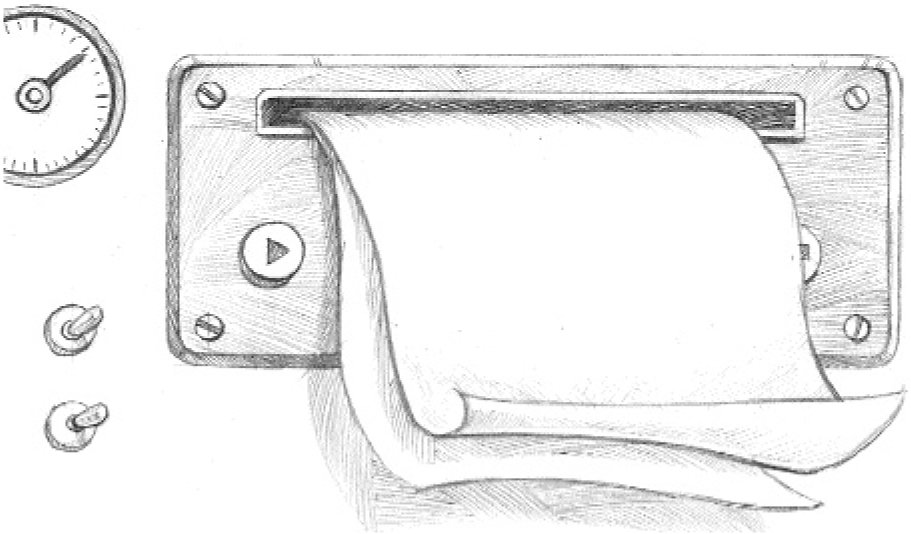
"Sunny," Violet said, "we've researched an antidote. Only horseradish can save you. But there's no horseradish in the kitchen."

"Sunny," Klaus said, "is there a culinary equivalent of horseradish?"

Sunny opened her mouth as if trying to say something, but the elder Baudelaires only heard the hoarse, whistling sound of air trying to make its way past the mushrooms. Her tiny hands curled into fists, and her body twisted back and forth in pain and fear. Finally, she managed to utter one word—a word that many might not have understood. Some might have thought it was part of Sunny's personal vocabulary—perhaps her way of saying "I love you," or even "Farewell, siblings." Some might have thought it was pure nonsense, just the noises one might make when a deadly fungus has defeated you. But there are many others who would have understood it immediately. A person from Japan would have known she was talking about a condiment often served with raw fish and pickled ginger. A chef would have known that Sunny was referring to a strong, green root, widely considered the culinary equivalent of horseradish. And Violet and Klaus knew that their sister was naming her salvation, a phrase which here means "something that would save her life," or "something that would rescue her from the Medusoid Mycelium," or, most importantly, "an item the eldest Baudelaire still had in the waterproof pocket of her uniform, sealed in a tin Sunny had found in an underwater cavern."

"Wasabi," Sunny said, in a hoarse, mushroom-choked whisper, and she did not have to say anything more.

CHAPTER
Twelve



The expression “the tables have turned” is not one the Baudelaire orphans had much occasion to use, as it refers to a situation that has suddenly been reversed, so that those who were previously in a powerless position could suddenly find themselves in a powerful one, and vice versa. For the Baudelaires, the tables had turned at Briny Beach, when they received news of the terrible fire, and Count Olaf suddenly became a powerful and terrifying figure in their lives. As time went on, the siblings waited and waited for the tables to turn back, so that Olaf might be defeated once and for all and they could find themselves free of the sinister and mysterious forces that threatened to engulf them, but the tables of the Baudelaires’ lives seemed stuck, with the children always in a position of misery and sorrow while wickedness seemed to triumph all around them. But as Violet hurriedly opened the tin of wasabi she had been keeping in her pocket, and spooned the green, spicy mixture into Sunny’s wheezing mouth, it seemed like the tables might turn after all. Sunny gasped when the wasabi hit her tongue, and the stalks and caps of the Medusoid Mycelium shivered, and seemed to shrink back from the powerful Japanese condiment. In moments, the fungus began to wither and fade away, and Sunny’s wheezing faded into coughing, and her coughing faded into deep breaths as the youngest Baudelaire rallied, a word which here means “regained her strength, and ability to breathe.” The youngest Baudelaire hung on tight to her siblings’ hands, and her eyes filled with tears, but Violet and Klaus could see that the Medusoid Mycelium would not triumph over their sister.

“It’s working,” Violet said. “Sunny’s breathing is getting stronger.”

“Yes,” Klaus said. “We’ve turned the tables on that ghastly fungus.”

“Water,” Sunny said, and her brother stood up from the kitchen floor and quickly got his sister a glass of water. Weakly, the youngest Baudelaire sat up and drank deeply from the glass, and then hugged both her siblings as tightly as she could.

“Thank you,” she said. “Saved me.”

“You saved yourself,” Violet pointed out. “We had the wasabi this whole time, but we didn’t think of giving it to you until you told us.”

Sunny coughed again, and lay back down on the floor. “Tuckered,” she murmured.

“I’m not surprised you’re exhausted,” Violet said. “You’ve been through quite an ordeal. Shall we carry you to the barracks so you can rest?”

“Rest here,” Sunny said, curling up at the foot of the stove.

“Will you really be comfortable on the kitchen floor?” Klaus asked.

Sunny opened one exhausted eye and smiled at her siblings. “Near you,” she said.

“All right, Sunny,” Violet said, grabbing a dish towel from the kitchen counter, and folding it into a pillow for her sister. “We’ll be in the Main Hall if you need us.”

“What next?” she murmured.

“Shh,” Klaus said, putting another dish towel on top of her. “Don’t worry, Sunny. We’ll figure out what to do next.”

The Baudelaires tiptoed out of the kitchen, carrying the tin of wasabi. “Do you think she’ll be all right?” Violet asked.

“I’m sure she will,” Klaus said. “After a nap she’ll be as good as new. But we should eat some of that wasabi ourselves. When we opened the diving helmet, we were exposed to the Medusoid Mycelium, and we’ll need all of our strength to get away from Olaf.”

Violet nodded, and put a spoonful of wasabi into her mouth, shuddering violently as the condiment hit her tongue. “There’s one last spoonful,” Violet said, handing the tin to her brother. “We’d better make sure that diving helmet stays closed until we get our hands on some horseradish and destroy that fungus for good.”

Klaus nodded in agreement, closed his eyes, and ate the last of the Japanese condiment. “If we ever invent that food code we talked about with Fiona,” he said, “the word ‘wasabi’ should mean ‘powerful.’ No wonder this cured our sister.”

“But now that we’ve cured her,” Violet said, remembering Sunny’s question as she fell asleep, “what next?”

“Olaf is next,” Klaus said firmly. “He said he has everything he needs to defeat V.F.D. forever—except the sugar bowl.”

“You’re right,” Violet said. “We have to turn the tables on him, and find it before he does.”

“But we don’t know where it is,” Klaus said. “Someone must have taken it from the Gorgonian Grotto.”

“I wonder—” Violet said, but she never said what she wondered, because a strange noise interrupted her. The noise was a sort of whir, followed by a sort of beep, followed by all sorts of noises, and they seemed to be coming from deep within the machinery of the *Queequeg*. Finally, a green light lit up on a panel in the wall, and a flat, white object began to slither out of a tiny slit in the panel.

“It’s paper,” Klaus said.

“It’s more than paper,” Violet said, and walked over to the panel. The sheet of paper curled into her hand as it emerged from the slit, as if the machine were impatient for the eldest Baudelaire to read it. “This is the telegram device. We must be receiving—”

“A Volunteer Factual Dispatch,” Klaus finished.

Violet nodded, and scanned the paper quickly. Sure enough, the words “Volunteer Factual Dispatch” were printed on the top, and as more and more of the paper appeared, the eldest Baudelaire saw that it was addressed “To the *Queequeg*,” with the date printed below, as well as the name of the person who was sending the telegram, miles and miles away on dry land. It was a name Violet almost dared not say out loud, even though she had felt as if she had been whispering it to herself for days, ever since the icy waters of the Stricken Stream had carried away a young man who meant very much to her.

“It’s from Quigley Quagmire,” she said quietly.

Klaus’s eyes widened in astonishment. “What does he say?” he asked.

Violet smiled as the telegram finished printing, her finger touching the Q in her friend’s name. It was almost as if knowing that Quigley was alive was enough of a message. “‘It is my understanding that you have three additional volunteers on board STOP,’” she read, remembering that “STOP” indicates the end of a sentence in a telegram. “‘We are in desperate need of their services for a most urgent matter STOP. Please deliver them Tuesday to the location indicated in the rhymes below STOP.’” She scanned the paper and frowned thoughtfully. “Then there are two poems,” she said. “One by Lewis Carroll and the other by T. S. Eliot.”

Klaus took his commonplace book out of his pocket, and flipped pages until he found what he was looking for. “Verse Fluctuation Declaration,” he said. “That’s the code we learned in the grotto. Quigley must have changed some of the words in the poems, so no one else would know where we’re supposed to meet him. Let’s see if we can recognize the changes.”

Violet nodded, and read the first poem out loud:

“‘O Oysters, come and walk with us!’

The Walrus did beseech.

‘A pleasant walk, a pleasant talk,

Along the movie theater.’”

“That last part sounds wrong,” Violet said.

“There were no movie theaters when Lewis Carroll was alive,” Klaus said. “But what are the real words to the poem?”

“I don’t know,” Violet said. “I’ve always found Lewis Carroll too whimsical for my taste.”

“I like him,” Klaus said, “but I haven’t memorized his poems. Read the other one. Maybe that will help.”

Violet nodded, and read aloud:

“At the pink hour, when the eyes and back

Turn upward from the desk, when the human engine waits

Like a pony throbbing party…”

The voice of the eldest Baudelaire trailed off, and she looked at her brother in confusion. “That’s all,” she said. “The poem stops there.”

Klaus frowned. “There’s nothing else in the telegram?”

“Only a few letters at the very bottom,” she said. “‘CC: J.S.’ What does that mean?”

“‘CC’ means that Quigley sent a copy of this message to someone else,” Klaus said, “and ‘J.S.’ are the initials of the person.”

“Those mysterious initials again,” Violet said. “It can’t be Jacques Snicket, because he’s dead. But who else could it be?”

“We can’t worry about that now,” Klaus said. “We have to figure out what words have been substituted in these poems.”

“How can we do that?” Violet asked.

“I don’t know,” Klaus said. “Why would Quigley think we would have memorized these poems?”

“He wouldn’t think that,” Violet said. “He knows us. But the telegram was addressed to the *Queequeg*. He knew that someone on board could decode the poetry.”

“But who?” Klaus asked. “Not Fiona—she’s a mycologist. An optimist like Phil isn’t likely to be familiar with T. S. Eliot. And it’s hard to imagine Captain Widdershins having a serious interest in poetry.”

“Not anymore,” Violet said thoughtfully. “But Fiona’s brother said he and the captain used to study poetry together.”

“That’s true,” Klaus said. “He said they used to read to one another in the Main Hall.” He walked over to the sideboard and opened the cabinet, peering at the books Fiona kept inside. “But there’s no poetry here—just Fiona’s mycological library.”

“Captain Widdershins wouldn’t keep poetry books out front like that,” Violet said. “He would have kept them secret.”

“Just like he kept the secret of what happened to Fiona’s brother,” Klaus said.

“He thought there were secrets too terrible for young people to know,” Violet said, “but now we need to know them.”

Klaus was silent for a moment, and then turned to his sister. “There’s something I never told you,” he said. “Remember when our parents were so angry over the spoiled atlas?”

“We talked about that in the grotto,” Violet said. “The rain spoiled it when we left the library window open.”

“I don’t think that’s the only reason they were mad,” Klaus said. “I took that atlas down from the top shelf—one I could only reach by putting the stepladder on top of the chair. They didn’t think I could reach that shelf.”

“Why would that make them angry?” Violet asked.

Klaus looked down. “That’s where they kept books they didn’t want us to find,” he said. “I was interested in the atlas, but when I removed it from the shelf there was a whole row of other books.”

“What kind of books?” Violet asked.

“I didn’t get a good look at them,” Klaus asked. “There were a few books about war, and I think a few romances. I was too interested in the atlas to investigate any further, but I remember thinking it was strange that our parents had hidden those books. That’s why they were so angry, I think—when they saw the atlas on the window seat, they knew I’d discovered their secret.”

“Did you ever look at them again?” Violet said.

“I didn’t have a chance,” Klaus said. “They moved them to another hiding place, and I never saw them again.”

“Maybe our parents were going to tell us what was in those books when we were older,” Violet said.

“Maybe,” Klaus agreed. “But we’ll never know. We lost them in the fire.”

The elder Baudelaires sat quietly for a moment, looking at the cabinet in the sideboard, and then, without a word, the two siblings stepped onto the wooden table so they could open the highest cabinet. Inside was a small stack of books on such dull topics as child rearing, proper and improper diets, and the water cycle, but when the children pushed these books aside they saw what they had been looking for.

“Elizabeth Bishop,” Violet said, “Charles Simic, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Franz Wright, Daphne Gottlieb—there’s all sorts of poetry here.”

“Why don’t you read T. S. Eliot,” Klaus suggested, handing her a thick, dusty volume, “and I’ll tackle Lewis Carroll. If we read quickly we should be able to find the real poems and decode the message.”

“I found something else,” Violet said, handing her brother a crumpled square of paper. “Look.”

Klaus looked at what his sister had given him. It was a photograph, blurred and faded with age, of four people, grouped together like a family. In the center of the photograph was a large man with a long mustache that was curved at the end like a pair of parentheses—Captain Widdershins, of course, although he looked much younger and a great deal happier than the children had ever seen him. He was laughing, and his arm was around someone the two Baudelaires recognized as the hook-handed man, although he was not hook-handed in the photograph—both of his hands were perfectly intact, one resting on the captain’s shoulder, and the other pointing at whoever was taking the picture—and he was young enough to still be called a teenager, instead of a man. On the other side of the captain was a woman who was laughing as hard as the captain, and in her arms was a young infant with a tiny set of triangular glasses.

“That must be Fiona’s mother,” Klaus said, pointing at the laughing woman.

“Look,” Violet said, pointing to the wall behind the family. “This was taken on board the *Queequeg*. That’s the edge of the plaque with the captain’s personal philosophy—‘He who hesitates is lost.’”

“The whole family is lost, almost,” Klaus said quietly. “Fiona’s mother is dead. Her brother joined Count Olaf’s troupe. And who knows where her stepfather is?” He put down the photograph, opened his commonplace book, and flipped to the beginning, where he had pasted another photograph taken long ago. This photograph also had four people in it, although one of the people was facing away from the camera, so it was impossible to tell who it was. The second person was Jacques Snicket, who of course was long dead. And the other two people were the Baudelaire parents. Klaus had kept this photograph ever since the children found it at Heimlich Hospital, and had looked at it every day, gazing into his parents’ faces and reading the one sentence, over and over, that had been typed below it. “Because of the evidence discussed on page nine,” the sentence read, “experts now suspect that there may in fact be one survivor of the fire, but the survivor’s whereabouts are unknown.” For quite some time, the Baudelaires had thought this meant one of their parents was alive after all, but now they were almost certain it meant no such thing. Violet and Klaus looked from one photograph to the other, imagining a time when no one in the pictures was lost, and everyone was happy.

Klaus sighed, and looked at his sister. “Maybe we shouldn’t be hesitating here,” Klaus said. “Maybe we should be rescuing our captain, instead of reading books of poetry and looking at old photographs. I don’t want to lose Fiona.”

“Fiona’s safe with her brother,” Violet said, “and I’m sure she’ll join us when she can. We need to decode this message, or we might lose everything. In this case, he or she who doesn’t hesitate is lost.”

“What if we decode the message before Fiona arrives?” Klaus asked. “Do we wait for her to join us?”

“We wouldn’t have to,” Violet said. “The three of us could properly operate this submarine by ourselves. All we’d need to do is repair the porthole, and we could probably steer the *Queequeg* out of the *Carmelita*.”

“We can’t abandon her here,” Klaus said. “She wouldn’t abandon us.”

“Are you sure?” Violet asked.

Klaus sighed, and looked at the photograph again. “No,” he said. “Let’s get to work.”

Violet nodded in agreement, and the two Baudelaires shelved the discussion—a phrase which here means “temporarily stopped their conversation”—and unshelved the poetry books in order to get to work on decoding Quigley’s Verse Fluctuation Declarations. It had been some time since the Baudelaires had been able to read in a comfortable place, and the children were pleased to find themselves silently flipping pages, searching for certain words, and even taking a few notes. Reading poetry, even if you are only reading to find a secret message hidden within its words, can often give one a feeling of power, the way you can feel powerful if you are the only one who brought an umbrella on a rainy day, or the only one who knows how to untie knots when you’re taken hostage. With each poem the children felt more and more powerful—or, as they might have said in their food code, more and more wasabi—and by the time the two volunteers were interrupted they felt as if the tables just might be continuing to turn.

“Snack!” announced a cheerful voice below them, and Violet and Klaus were pleased to see their sister emerging from the kitchen carrying a small plate.

“Sunny!” Violet cried. “We thought you were asleep.”

“Rekoop,” the youngest Baudelaire said, which meant something along the lines of, “I had a brief nap, and when I woke up I felt well enough to cook something.”

“I am a bit hungry,” Klaus admitted. “What did you make us?”

“Amuse bouche,” Sunny said, which meant something like, “Tiny water chestnut sandwiches, with a spread of cheese and sesame seeds.”

“They’re quite tasty,” Violet said, and the three children shared the plate of amuse bouche as the elder Baudelaires brought Sunny up to speed, a phrase which here means “told their sister what had happened while she was suffering inside the diving helmet.” They told her about the terrible submarine that had swallowed the *Queequeg,* and the terrible villain they encountered inside. They described the hideous circumstances in which the Snow Scouts found themselves, and the hideous clothing worn by Esmé Squalor and Carmelita Spats. They told her about the Volunteer Factual Dispatch, and the Verse Fluctuation Declarations they were trying to decode. And, finally, they told her about the hook-handed man being Fiona’s long-lost brother, and the possibility that he might join them aboard the *Queequeg.*

“Perifido,” Sunny said, which meant “It would be foolish to trust one of Olaf’s henchmen.”

“We don’t trust him,” Klaus said. “Not really. But Fiona trusts him, and we trust Fiona.”

“Volatile,” Sunny said.

“Yes,” Violet admitted, “but we don’t have much choice. We’re in the middle of the ocean—”

“And we need to get to the beach,” Klaus said, and held up the book of Lewis Carroll’s poetry. “I think I’ve solved part of the Verse Fluctuation Declaration. Lewis Carroll has a poem called ‘The Walrus and the Carpenter.’”

“There was something about a walrus in the telegram,” Violet said.

“Yes,” Klaus said. “It took me a while to find the specific stanza, but here it is. Quigley wrote:

> *“‘O Oysters, come and walk with us!’*
>
> *The Walrus did beseech.*

‘A pleasant walk, a pleasant talk,

Along the movie theater.’”

“Yes,” Violet said. “But what does the actual poem say?”

Klaus read,

“‘O Oysters, come and walk with us!’

The Walrus did beseech.

‘A pleasant walk, a pleasant talk,

Along the briny beach.’”

Klaus closed the book and looked up at his sisters. “Quigley wants us to meet him tomorrow,” he said, “at Briny Beach.”

“Briny Beach,” Violet repeated quietly. The eldest Baudelaire did not have to remind her siblings, of course, of the last time they were at Briny Beach, learning from Mr. Poe that the tables of their lives had turned. The three siblings sat and thought of that terrible day, which felt as blurred and faded as the photograph of Fiona’s family—or the photograph of their own parents, pasted into Klaus’s commonplace book. Returning to Briny Beach after all this time felt to the Baudelaires like an enormous step backward, as if they would lose their parents and their home again, and Mr. Poe would take them once more to Count Olaf’s house, and all the unfortunate events would crash over them once more, like the waves of the ocean crashing on the tidepools of Briny Beach and the tiny, passive creatures who lived inside them.

“How would we get there?” Klaus asked.

“In the *Queequeg,*” Violet said. “This submarine should have a location device, and once we know where we are, I think I could set a course for Briny Beach.”

“Distance?” Sunny asked.

“It shouldn’t be far,” Klaus said. “I’d have to check the charts. But what would we do when we got there?”

“I think I have the answer to that,” Violet said, turning to her book of T. S. Eliot poems. “Quigley used lines from a very long poem in this book called *The Waste Land*.”

“I tried to read that,” Klaus said, “but I found T. S. Eliot too opaque. I scarcely understood a word.”

“Maybe it’s all in code,” Violet said. “Listen to this. Quigley wrote:

“At the pink hour, when the eyes and back

Turn upward from the desk, when the human engine waits

Like a pony throbbing party…

“But the real poem reads

“At the violet hour, when the eyes and back

Turn upward from the desk, when the human engine waits

Like a—”

“Blah blah blah ha ha ha!” interrupted a cruel, mocking voice. “Ha blah ha blah ha blah! Tee hee snaggle sniggle tee hee hee! Hubba hubba giggle diddle denouement!”

The Baudelaires looked up from their books to face Count Olaf, who was already stepping through the porthole and onto the wooden table. Behind him was Esmé Squalor, sneering beneath the hood of her octopus outfit, and the children could hear the unpleasant slapping footsteps of the horrid pink shoes of Carmelita Spats, who peeked her heart-decorated face into the submarine and giggled nastily.

“I’m happier than a pig eating bacon!” Count Olaf cried. “I’m tickled pinker than a sunburned Caucasian! I’m in higher spirits than a brand-new graveyard! I’m so happy-go-lucky that lucky and happy people are going to beat me with sticks out of pure, unbridled jealousy! Ha ha jicama! When I stopped by the brig to see how my associate was progressing, and found that you orphans had flown the coop, I was afraid you were escaping, or sabotaging my submarine, or even sending a telegram asking for help! But I should have known you were too dim-witted to do anything useful! Look at yourselves, orphans, snacking and reading poetry, while the powerful and good-looking people of the world cackle in triumph! Cackle cackle cutthroat!”

“In just a few minutes,” Esmé bragged, “we will arrive at the Hotel Denouement, thanks to our bratty rowing crew. Tee hee triumphant! V.F.D.’s last safe place will soon be in ashes—just like your home, Baudelaires!”

“I’m going to do a special tap-dancing ballerina fairy princess veterinarian dance recital,” Carmelita bragged, “on the graves of all those volunteers!” Carmelita leaped through the porthole, her pink tutu fluttering as if it were trying to escape, and joined Olaf on the table to begin a dance of triumph.

> *“C is for ‘cute,’”* Carmelita sang,
>
> *A is for ‘adorable’!*
>
> *R is for ‘ravishing’!*
>
> *M is for ‘gor—’”*

“Now, now, Carmelita,” Count Olaf said, giving the tap-dancing ballerina fairy princess veterinarian a tense smile. “Why don’t you save your dance recital for later? I’ll buy you all the dance costumes in the world. With V.F.D. out of the way, all the fortunes of the world can be mine—the Baudelaire fortune, the Quagmire fortune, the Widdershins fortune, the—”

“Where is Fiona?” Klaus asked, interrupting the villain. “What have you done with her? If you’ve hurt her—”

“Hurt her?” Count Olaf asked, his eyes shining bright beneath his one scraggly eyebrow. “Hurt Triangle Eyes? Why would I hurt a clever girl like that? Tee hee troupe member!”

With one of his tiresome dramatic gestures, Count Olaf pointed behind him, and Esmé clapped the tentacles of her outfit as two people appeared in the porthole. One was the hook-handed man, who looked as wicked as he ever had. And the other was Fiona, who looked slightly different. One difference was the expression on her face, which looked resigned, a word which here means “as if the mycologist had given up entirely on defeating Count Olaf.” But the other difference was printed on the slippery-looking uniform she was wearing, right in the center.

“No,” Klaus said quietly, as he stared at his friend.

“No,” Violet said firmly, and looked at Klaus.

“No!” Sunny said angrily, and bared her teeth as Fiona stepped through the porthole and stood beside Count Olaf on the wooden table. Her boot brushed against the poetry books Violet and Klaus had taken from the sideboard, including books by Lewis Carroll and T. S. Eliot. There are some who say that the poetry of Lewis Carroll is too whimsical, a word which here means “full of comic nonsense,” and other people complain that T. S. Eliot’s poetry is too opaque, which refers to something that is unnecessarily complicated. But while everyone may not agree on the poets represented on the wooden table, every noble reader in the world agrees that the poet represented on Fiona’s uniform was a writer of limited skill, who wrote awkward, tedious poetry on hopelessly sentimental topics.

“Yes,” Fiona said quietly, and the Baudelaire orphans looked up at the portrait of Edgar Guest, smiling on the front of her uniform, and felt the tables turn once more.

CHAPTER
Thirteen

The water cycle consists of three phenomena—evaporation, precipitation, and collection—and collection, the third of these phenomena, is the third of the phenomena that make up what is generally known as “the water cycle.” This phenomenon, known as “collection,” is the process of the gathering of water in the oceans, lakes, rivers, ponds, reservoirs, and puddles of the world, so that it will eventually go through the phenomena of evaporation and precipitation, thus beginning the water cycle all over again. It is a tedious thing for a reader to find in a book, of course, and I hope that my descriptions of the water cycle have bored you enough that you have put this book down long ago, and will not read Chapter Thirteen of *The Grim Grotto* any more than the Baudelaire orphans will ever read Chapter Thirty-Nine of *Mushroom Minutiae*, no matter how crucial such a chapter might be. But however tedious the water cycle is to readers, it must be very tedious indeed to the drops of water who must participate in the cycle over and over again. Occasionally, when I pause while writing my chronicle of the Baudelaire orphans, and my eyes and back turn upward from my desk to look out at the evening sky—the purple color of which explains the expression “the violet hour”—I imagine myself as a drop of water, especially if it is raining, or if my desk is floating in a reservoir. I think of how ghastly it would feel to be yanked away from my comrades, when we were gathered in a lake or puddle, and forced into the sky through the process of evaporation. I think how terrible it would feel to be chased out of a cloud by the process of precipitation, and tumble to the earth like a sugar bowl. And I think of how heartbroken I would feel to gather once more in a body of water and feel, during the process of collection, that I had reached the last safe place, only to have the tables turn, and evaporate into the sky once more as the tedious cycle started all over again. It is awful to contemplate this sort of life, in which one would always be forced into motion by a variety of mysterious and powerful forces, never staying anywhere for long, never finding a safe place one could call home, never able to turn the tables for very long, just as the Baudelaire orphans found it awful to contemplate their own lives as Fiona betrayed them, as so many of their companions had betrayed them before, just when it seemed they might break out of the tedious cycle of unfortunate events in which they found themselves trapped.

“Tell them, Triangle Eyes,” Count Olaf said with a wicked smile. “Tell the Baudelaires that you’ve joined up with me.”

“It’s true,” Fiona said, but behind her triangular glasses her eyes were downcast, a word which here means “looking sadly at the floor.” “Count Olaf said that if I helped him destroy the last safe place, he’d help me find my stepfather.”

“But Count Olaf and your stepfather are enemies!” Violet cried. “They’re on opposite sides of the schism.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure about that,” Esmé Squalor said, her suction cups dragging along the floor as she stepped through the broken porthole. “After all, Captain Widdershins abandoned you. Maybe he’s decided volunteers are out—and we’re in.”

“My brother, my stepfather, and I could be together again,” Fiona said quietly. “Don’t you understand, Baudelaires?”

"Of course they don't understand!" Count Olaf cried. "Ha ha half-wits! Those brats spend their lives reading books instead of chasing after fortunes! Now, let's remove all the valuables from the *Queequeg* and we'll lock the orphans up in the brig!"

"You won't get away from us this time!" the hook-handed man said, taking the tagliatelle grande from behind his back and whirling the noodle in the air.

"We didn't get away from you last time," Klaus said. "You helped us sneak over here, to save Sunny. You said you wanted to come with us when we escaped in the *Queequeg* and joined V.F.D. at the last safe place."

"V.F.D.," the hook-handed man sneered. With one scornful flick of his hook he popped one of the balloons Phil had used to decorate the Main Hall for Violet's birthday. "All those silly volunteers with their precious libraries and complicated codes—they're fools, every last one of them. I don't want to sit around reading idiotic books! He who hesitates is lost!"

"Or she," Fiona said. "Aye!"

"Yes," Count Olaf said, "let's not hesitate a moment longer, Hooky. Let's tour this submarine and steal anything we want!"

"I want to come, too!" Esmé said. "I need a new fashionable outfit!"

"Of course, boss," the hook-handed man said, walking toward the door of the Main Hall. "Follow me."

"No, you follow *me*!" Count Olaf said, pushing ahead of him. "I'm in charge!"

"But Countie," Carmelita whined, jumping off the wooden table and twirling around awkwardly. "I want to go first because I'm a tap-dancing ballerina fairy princess veterinarian!"

"Of course you get to go first, precious," Esmé said. "You get whatever your adorable little heart desires, right Olaf?"

“I guess so,” Olaf muttered.

“And tell Triangle Eyes to stay here and guard the orphans,” Carmelita said. “I don’t want her to take all the good stuff for herself.”

“Guard the orphans, Triangle Eyes,” Count Olaf said. “Although I don’t think you orphans really need to be guarded. After all, there’s nowhere for you to go! Tee hee traction!”

“Giggle giggle gaudy!” Carmelita cried, leading the way out of the Main Hall.

“Ha ha hair trigger!” Esmé screamed, following her.

“Tee hee tonsillectomy!” Count Olaf shrieked, walking behind his girlfriend.

“I also find this amusing!” the hook-handed man yelled, and slammed the door behind him, leaving the Baudelaires alone with Fiona.

“Traitor,” Sunny said.

“Sunny’s right,” Violet said. “Don’t do this, Fiona. There’s still time to change your mind, and stay on the noble side of the schism.”

“We received a Volunteer Factual Dispatch,” Klaus said, holding up the telegram. “V.F.D. is in desperate need of our services for a most urgent matter. We’re meeting the volunteers at Briny Beach. You could come with us, Fiona.”

“Greenhut!” Sunny cried. She meant something like, “You could be of enormous help,” but Fiona didn’t even wait for a translation.

“You wouldn’t abandon your sister,” the mycologist said. “Aye! You risked your lives to save Sunny. How can you ask me to abandon my brother?”

“Your brother is a wicked person,” Violet said.

"People aren't either wicked or noble," Fiona said. "They're like chef's salads."

Klaus picked up the photograph from the table and handed it to Fiona. "This doesn't look like a chef's salad to me," he said. "It looks like a family. Is this what your family would have you do, Fiona? Send three children to the brig, while you help a villain in his treacherous schemes?"

Fiona looked at the picture, and blinked back tears behind her triangular glasses. "My family is lost," she said. "Aye! My mother is dead. Aye! My father moved away. Aye! My stepfather has abandoned me. Aye! My brother may not be as wonderful as you Baudelaires, but he is the only family I have. Aye! I'm staying with him. Aye!"

"Stay with him if you must," Violet said, "but let us go."

"Rendezvous," Sunny said.

"Take us to Briny Beach," Klaus translated. "We might be on opposite sides of the schism, Fiona, but that doesn't mean we can't help one another."

Fiona sighed, and looked first at the Baudelaires and then at the photograph of her family. "I could turn my back," she said, "instead of guarding you."

"And we could take the *Queequeg*," Violet said, "and escape."

Fiona frowned, and put the photograph back down on the table. "If I let you go to Briny Beach," she said, "what will you do for me?"

"I'll teach you how to repair submarines," Violet said, gesturing to the telegram device. "You could restore the *Queequeg* to its former glory."

"I don't need the *Queequeg* anymore," Fiona said. "Aye! I'm part of the crew of the *Carmelita*."

"I'll give you my commonplace book," Klaus said, holding out his dark blue notebook. "It's full of important secrets."

“Count Olaf knows more secrets than you’ll ever learn,” Fiona replied.

“Mmph!” The children looked down and saw Sunny, who had slipped away while the others were talking, and was now walking unsteadily back through the door marked

KITCHEN, dragging her diving helmet.

“Don’t touch that, Sunny!” Violet cried. “There’s a very dangerous fungus in there, and we don’t have any more antidote!”

“Mycolo,” Sunny said, and lay the helmet at Fiona’s feet.

“Sunny’s right,” Klaus said, looking at the helmet and shuddering. “Inside that helmet is the bugaboo of the mycological pantheon—the Medusoid Mycelium.”

“I thought you destroyed it,” Fiona said.

“No,” Violet said. “The Medusoid Mycelium grows best in an enclosed space. You said that the poison of a deadly fungus can be the source of some wonderful medicines. This is a very valuable specimen for a mycologist like yourself.”

“That’s true,” Fiona admitted quietly, and looked down at the helmet. The Baudelaires looked down, too, remembering their terrible journey through the grotto. They remembered how cold and dark it was when they left the *Queequeg* and drifted through the cavern, and the horrifying sight of the Medusoid Mycelium trapping them in the eerie cave until the stalks and caps waned away. They remembered their chilly journey back to the submarine, and the dreadful discoveries of the missing crew and the mushrooms sprouting inside Sunny’s helmet, and the image of the octopus submarine on the sonar screen, and the villain who was waiting for them when they tumbled inside.

“We’re back!” Count Olaf announced, bursting back into the Main Hall with his comrades behind him. Esmé and Carmelita were peeking into a small, shiny box, and the hook-handed man was staggering under the weight of the uniforms and diving helmets he was carrying. “There wasn’t much to steal, I’m afraid—this submarine is not quite up to its former glory. Still, I found a small jewelry box hidden in the barracks, with a few valuable items.”

“I think the ruby ring is very in,” Esmé purred. “It would look wonderful with my flame-imitating dress.”

“That was my mother’s,” Fiona said quietly.

“She would have wanted me to have it,” Esmé said quickly. “We were close friends at school.”

“I want the necklace!” Carmelita demanded. “It goes perfectly with my veterinarian stethoscope! Give it to me, Countie!”

“I wish we had those carnival freaks with us,” the hook-handed man said. “They could help carry some of these uniforms.”

“We’ll see them at the Hotel Denouement,” Count Olaf, “along with the rest of my comrades. Well, let’s get out of here! We have lots to do before we arrive! Triangle Eyes, take the orphans to the brig! Ha ha hula dance!”

Humming a ridiculous tune, the villain performed a few dance steps of triumph, only to stumble over the diving helmet on the floor. Carmelita giggled nastily as Olaf reached down and rubbed his tattooed ankle.

“Ha, ha Countie!” cried Carmelita. “My dance recital was better than yours!”

“Get this hat out of here, Triangle Eyes,” Count Olaf snarled. He bent down, picked up the helmet, and started to hand it to Fiona, but the hook-handed man stopped him.

“I think you’ll want that helmet for yourself, boss,” the henchman said.

“I prefer a smaller, lighter hat,” Count Olaf said, “but I appreciate the gesture.”

“What my brother means,” Fiona explained, “is that inside this helmet is the Medusoid Mycelium.”

The Baudelaires gasped and looked at one another in horror, as Count Olaf peered through the helmet’s tiny window, his eyes wide beneath his eybrow. “The Medusoid Mycelium,” he murmured, and ran his tongue thoughtfully along his teeth. “Could it be?”

“Impossible,” Esmé Squalor said. “That fungus was destroyed long ago.”

“They brought it with them,” the hook-handed man said. “That’s why the baby was so sick.”

“This is marvelous,” Olaf said, his voice as raspy and wheezy as if he were poisoned himself. “As soon as you Baudelaires are in the brig, I’m going to open this helmet and toss it inside! You’ll suffer as I’ve always wanted you to suffer.”

“That’s not what we should do!” Fiona cried. “That’s a very valuable specimen!”

Esmé stepped forward and draped two of her tentacles around Olaf’s neck. “Triangle Eyes is right,” she said. “You don’t want to waste the fungus on the orphans. Besides, you need one of them alive to get the fortune.”

“That’s true,” Olaf agreed, “but the idea of those orphans not being able to breathe is awfully attractive.”

“But think of the fortunes we can steal!” Esmé said. “Think of the people we can boss around! With the Medusoid Mycelium in our grasp, who can stop us now?”

“No one!” Count Olaf cackled in triumph. “Ha Hunan chicken! Ha ha hamantaschen! Ha ha hors d’oeuvres! Ha ha h—”

But the Baudelaire children never learned what ridiculous word Olaf was going to utter, as he interrupted himself to point across the Main Hall at a screen on the wall. The screen looked like a piece of graph paper, lit up in green light, and at the center were both a glowing letter Q, representing the *Queequeg,* and a glowing eye, representing the terrible octopus submarine that had devoured them. But at the top of the screen was another shape—one they had almost forgotten about. It was a long curved tube, with a small circle at the end of it, slithering slowly down the screen like a snake, or an enormous question mark, or some terrible evil the children could not even imagine.

“What’s that cakesniffing shape?” asked Carmelita Spats. “It looks like a big comma.”

“Shh!” Count Olaf hissed, putting his filthy hand over Carmelita’s mouth. “Silence, everyone!”

“We have to get out of here,” Esmé murmured. “This octopus is no match for that thing.”

“You’re right,” Olaf muttered. “Esmé, go whip our rowers so they’ll go faster! Hooky, store those uniforms! Triangle Eyes, take the orphans to the brig!”

“What about me?” Carmelita asked. “I’m the cutest, so I should get to do something.”

“I guess you’d better come with me,” the count said wearily. “But no tap-dancing! We don’t want to show up on their sonar!”

“Ta ta, cakesniffers!” Carmelita said, waving her pink wand at the three siblings.

“You’re so stylish, darling,” Esmé said. “It’s like I always say: You can’t be too rich or too in!”

The two wicked females jumped through the broken porthole and out of the *Queequeg,* followed by the hook-handed man, who gave the

Baudelaires an awkward wave. But before Count Olaf exited, he paused, standing on the wooden table, and drew his long, sharp sword to point at the children. “Your luck is over at last,” he said, in a terrible voice. “For far too long, you keep defeating my plans and escaping from my clutches—a happy cycle for you orphans and an unprofitable one for me. But now the tables have turned, Baudelaires. You’ve finally run out of places to run. And as soon as we get away from *that* ”—he pointed at the sonar screen with a flick of his sword, and raised his eyebrow menacingly—“you’ll see that this cycle has finally been broken. You should have given up a long time ago, orphans. I triumphed the moment you lost your family.”

“We didn’t lose our family,” Violet said. “Only our parents.”

“You’ll lose everything, orphans,” Count Olaf replied. “Wait and see.”

Without another word, he leaped out of the porthole and disappeared into his ghastly mechanical octopus, leaving the Baudelaires alone with Fiona.

“Are you going to take us to the brig?” Klaus asked.

“No,” Fiona said. “Aye! I’ll let you escape—if you can. You’d better hurry.”

“I can set a course,” Violet said, “and Klaus can read the tidal charts.”

“Serve cake,” Sunny said.

Fiona smiled, and looked around the Main Hall sadly. “Take good care of the *Queequeg*,” she said. “I’ll miss it. Aye!”

“I’ll miss *you*,” Klaus said. “Won’t you come with us, Fiona? Now that Olaf has the Medusoid Mycelium, we’ll need all the help we can get. Don’t you want to finish the submarine’s mission? We never found the sugar bowl. We never found your stepfather. We never even finished that code we were going to invent.”

Fiona nodded sadly, and walked to the wooden table. She picked up *Mushroom Minutiae,* and then acted contrary to her personal philosophy, a phrase which here means "hesitated for a moment, and faced the middle Baudelaire." "When you think of me," she said quietly, "think of a food you love very much." She leaned forward, kissed Klaus gently on the mouth, and disappeared through the porthole without so much as an "Aye!" The three Baudelaires listened to the mycologist's footsteps as she joined Count Olaf and his comrades, and left them behind.

"She's gone," Klaus said, as if he could hardly believe it himself. He lifted one trembling hand to his face, as if Fiona had given him a slap instead of a kiss. "How could she leave?" he asked. "She betrayed me. She betrayed all of us. How could someone so wonderful do something so terrible?"

"I guess her brother was right," Violet said, putting her arm around her brother. "People aren't either wicked or noble."

"Correctiona," Sunny said, which meant "Fiona was right, too—we'd better hurry if we want to escape from the *Carmelita* before Olaf notices we're not in the brig."

"I'll set a course for Briny Beach," Violet said.

Klaus took one last look at the porthole where Fiona had disappeared, and nodded. "I'll look at the tidal charts," he said.

"Amnesi!" Sunny cried. She meant something along the lines of, "You're forgetting something!" and pointed one small finger at the circle of glass on the floor.

"Sunny's right," Klaus said. "We can't launch the submarine without repairing that porthole, or we'll drown."

But Violet was already halfway up the rope ladder that led to the *Queequeg*'s controls. "You'll have to repair that yourself, Sunny," she called down.

"Cook," Sunny replied. "Cook and teeth."

"We don't have time to argue," Klaus said grimly, pointing at the sonar screen. The question mark was inching closer and closer to the glowing Q.

"Aye," Sunny said, and hurried to the glass circle on the floor. It was still intact, but the youngest Baudelaire could think of nothing that could reattach the circle to the wall of the submarine.

"I think I've found the location device," Violet called down from the *Queequeg*'s controls. Quickly she flipped a switch, and waited impatiently as a screen came to life. "It looks like we're fourteen nautical miles southeast of the Gorgonian Grotto. Does that help?"

"Aye," Klaus said, running his finger over one of the charts. "We need to travel straight north to Briny Beach. It shouldn't be far. But how are we going to get out of the *Carmelita*?"

"I guess we'll just fire up the engines," Violet said, "and I'll try to steer us back through the tunnel."

"Have you ever steered a submarine before?" Klaus asked nervously.

"Of course not," Violet said. "We're in uncharted waters, aye?"

"Aye," Klaus said, and looked proudly up at his sister. The two Baudelaires could not help grinning for a moment before Violet pulled a large lever, and the familiar, whirring sound of the *Queequeg*'s engines filled the Main Hall.

"Gangway!" Sunny cried, squeezing past Klaus as she raced toward the kitchen. Violet and Klaus heard their sister fumbling around for a moment, and then the youngest Baudelaire returned, carrying two boxes the siblings recognized from their time in the town of Paltryville. "Gum!" she cried triumphantly, already ripping the wrappers off several pieces and sticking them into her mouth.

“Good idea, Sunny,” Violet called. “The gum can act as an adhesive, and stick the porthole back together.”

“That thing is getting closer,” Klaus said, pointing to the sonar screen. “We’d better get the submarine moving. Sunny can do the repair work while we move through the tunnel.”

“I’ll need your help, Klaus,” Violet said. “Stand at the porthole and let me know which way to turn. Aye?”

“Aye!” Klaus replied.

“Aye!” Sunny cried, her mouth full of gum. The elder Baudelaires remembered that their sibling had been too young for gum when the children were working at the lumbermill, and they could hardly believe she had grown up enough to be stuffing handfuls of the sticky substance into her mouth.

“Which way do I go?” Violet called from the controls.

Klaus peered out of the porthole. “Right!” he called back, and the *Queequeg* lurched to the right, traveling with difficulty in the little water at the bottom of the tunnel. There was an enormous scraping sound, and the Baudelaires heard a loud splashing from inside one of the pipes. “I mean, left!” Klaus said quickly. “You and I are facing opposite directions! Left!”

“Aye!” Violet cried, and the submarine lurched in the opposite direction. Through the porthole, the Baudelaires could see that they were moving away from the platform where Olaf had first greeted them. Sunny spat a huge wad of gum onto the glass circle, and spread it around with her hands on the circle’s edge.

“Right!” Klaus cried, and Violet turned the *Queequeg* again, narrowly missing a turn in the passageway. The eldest Baudelaire looked nervously at the sonar screen, where the sinister shape was moving closer and closer to them.

“Left!” Klaus cried. “Left and down!” The submarine lurched and sank, and through the porthole the middle Baudelaire caught a brief glimpse of the rowing room, with Esmé holding the tagliatelle grande threateningly in one fake tentacle. Sunny hurriedly stuffed more gum into her mouth, moving her enormous teeth furiously to soften the candy.

“Left again!” Klaus cried. “And then a very sharp right when I say ‘*Now*’!”

“Now?” Violet called back.

“No,” Klaus said, and held up one hand as Sunny spit more gum onto the glass circle. *“Now!”*

The submarine lurched violently to the right, sending several objects tumbling from the wooden table. Sunny ducked to avoid being knocked on the head by the poetry of T. S. Eliot. “Sorry for the bumps,” Violet called, from the top of the rope ladder. “I’m still getting the hang of these controls. What’s next?”

Klaus peered out of the porthole. “Keep going straight,” he said, “and we should exit the octopus.”

“Help!” Sunny cried, spreading the rest of the gum on the edge of the circle. Klaus hurried to her side, and Violet raced down the rope ladder to help, leaving the submarine’s controls alone so the *Queequeg* would travel in a straight line. Together, the three Baudelaires picked up the glass circle and climbed onto the wooden table so they could put the porthole back together.

“I hope it holds,” Violet said.

“If it doesn’t,” Klaus said, “we’ll know soon enough.”

“On three,” Sunny said, which meant something like, “After I say one and two.” “One! Due!”

“Three!” the Baudelaire orphans said in unison, and pressed the glass circle against the hole Olaf had cut, smoothing the gum over the crack so that it might hold firm, just as the *Queequeg* tumbled out of the mechanical octopus into the chilly waters of the ocean. The Baudelaires pushed against the porthole together, their arms stretched out against the glass as if they were trying to keep someone from coming in a door. A few rivulets—a word which here means “tiny streams of water”—dripped through the gum, but Sunny hurriedly patted the sticky substance into place to stop the leaks. Her tiny hands smoothed the gum over the edge of the circle, making sure her handiwork was strong enough that the children wouldn’t drown, but when she heard her siblings gasp she looked up from her work, looked through the repaired porthole, and stared in amazement at what she saw.

In the final analysis—a phrase which here means “after much thought, and some debate with my colleagues”—Captain Widdershins was wrong about a great many things. He was wrong about his personal philosophy, because there are plenty of times when one should hesitate. He was wrong about his wife’s death, because as Fiona suspected, Mrs. Widdershins did not die in a manatee accident. He was wrong to call Phil “Cookie” when it is more polite to call someone by their proper name, and he was wrong to abandon the *Queequeg,* no matter what he heard from the woman who came to fetch him. Captain Widdershins was wrong to trust his stepson for so many years, and wrong to participate in the destruction of Anwhistle Aquatics, and he was wrong to insist, as he did so many years ago, that a story in *The Daily Punctilio* was completely true, and to show this article to so many volunteers, including the Baudelaire parents, the Snicket siblings, and the woman I happened to love. But Captain Widdershins was right about one thing. He was right to say that there are secrets in this world too terrible for young people to know, for the simple reason that there are secrets in this world too terrible for anyone to know, whether they are as young as Sunny Baudelaire or as old as Gregor Anwhistle—secrets so terrible that they ought to be kept secret, which is probably how the secrets became secrets in the first place, and one of those secrets is the long, strange shape the Baudelaire orphans saw, first on the *Queequeg*’s sonar, and then as they held the porthole in place and stared out into the waters of the sea. Night had fallen—Monday night—so the view outside was very dark, and the Baudelaires could scarcely see this enormous and sinister shape. They could not even tell, just as I will not tell, if it was some horrifying mechanical device, such as a submarine, or some ghastly creature of the sea. They merely saw an enormous shadow, curling and uncurling in the water, as if Count Olaf's one eyebrow had grown into an enormous beast that was roaming the sea, a shadow as chilling as the villain's glare and as dark as villainy itself. The Baudelaire orphans had never seen anything so utterly eerie, and they found themselves sitting still as statues, pressing against the porthole in an utter hush. It was probably this hush that saved them, for the sinister shape curled once more, and began to fade into the blackness of the water.

"Shh," Violet said, although no one had spoken. It was the gentle, low shushing one might do to comfort a baby, crying in the middle of the night over whatever tragedy keeps babies awake in their cribs, and keeps the other members of the baby's family standing vigil, a phrase which here means "keeping nearby, to make sure everyone is safe." It does not really mean anything, this shushing sound, and yet the younger Baudelaires did not ask their sister what she meant, and merely stood vigil with her, as the shape disappeared into the ocean of the night, and the children were safe once more. Without a word, Violet took her hands off the glass, climbed off the table, and resumed her place at the *Queequeg*'s controls. For the rest of their journey, none of the children spoke, as if the unearthly spell of that terrible secret shape were still lingering over them. All night long and into the morning, Violet worked the levers and switches of the submarine, to make sure it stayed on course, and Klaus marked their path on the charts, to make sure they were heading to the right place, and Sunny served slices of Violet's birthday cake to her fellow volunteers, but none of the three Baudelaires spoke until a gentle *bump!* rocked the *Queequeg,* and the submarine came to a gentle stop. Violet climbed down the rope ladder and ducked underneath a pipe to peer through the periscope, just as Captain Widdershins must have peered at the Baudelaires up in the Mortmain Mountains.

"We're here," she said, and the three Baudelaires left the Main Hall and walked down the leaky corridor to the room where they had first climbed aboard the submarine.

“Valve?” Sunny asked.

“We shouldn’t have to activate the valve,” Violet said. “When I looked through the periscope, I saw Briny Beach, so we can simply climb up the ladder—”

“And end up where we were,” Klaus finished, “a long time ago.”

Without any further discussion the Baudelaire children climbed up the ladder, their steps echoing down the narrow passageway, until they reached the hatch. Violet grabbed the handle to open it, and found that her siblings had each grabbed the handle, too, so all three children turned the handle together, and opened the hatch together, and together they climbed out of the passageway, down the outside of the submarine, and lowered themselves onto the sand of Briny Beach. It was morning—the same time of morning as the last time the Baudelaire children had been there, receiving the dreadful news about the fire, and it was just as gray and foggy as that terrible day. Violet even saw a slender, smooth stone on the sand, and picked it up, just as she had done so long ago, skipping rocks into the water without ever imagining she would soon be exploring its terrible depths. The siblings blinked in the morning sun, and felt as if some cycle were about to begin all over again—that once more they would receive terrible news, and that once more they would be taken to a new home, only to have villainy surround them once more, as had happened so many times since their last visit to Briny Beach, just as you might be wondering if the Baudelaires’ miserable story will begin all over again for you, with my warning you that if you are looking for happy endings, you would be better off reading some other book. It is not a pleasant feeling, to imagine that the tables will never turn and that a tedious cycle will begin all over again, and it made the Baudelaires feel passive, just as they had in the waters of the Stricken Stream, accepting what was happening without doing anything about it as they looked around at the unchanged shore.

“Gack!” Sunny said, which meant “Look at that mysterious figure emerging from the fog!” and the Baudelaires watched as a familiar shape stopped in front of them, took off a tall top hat, and coughed into a white handkerchief.

“Baudelaires!” Mr. Poe said, when he was done coughing. “Egad! I can’t believe it! I can’t believe you’re here!”

“You?” Klaus asked, gazing at the banker in astonishment. “*You’re* the one we’re supposed to meet?”

“I guess so,” Mr. Poe said, frowning and taking a crumpled piece of paper from his pocket. “I received a message saying that you’d be here at Briny Beach today.”

“Who sent the message?” Klaus asked.

Mr. Poe coughed once more, and then shrugged his shoulders wearily. The children noticed that he looked quite a bit older than the last time they had seen him, and wondered how much older they looked themselves. “The message is signed J.S.,” Mr. Poe said. “I assume that it’s that reporter from *The Daily Punctilio*—Geraldine Julienne. How in the world did you get here? Where in the world have you been? I must admit, Baudelaires, I had given up all hope of ever finding you again! It was a shame to think that the Baudelaire fortune would just sit in the bank, gathering interest and dust! Well, never mind that now. You’d better come with me—my car’s parked nearby. You have a great deal of explaining to do.”

“No,” Violet said.

“No?” Mr. Poe said in amazement, and coughed violently into his handkerchief. “Of course you do! You’ve been missing for a very long time, children! It was very inconsiderate of you to run away without telling me where you were, particularly when you’ve been accused of murder, arson, kidnapping, and some assorted misdemeanors! We’re going to get right in my car, and I’ll drive you to the police station, and—”

“No,” Violet said again, and reached into the pocket of her uniform. She held up the telegram to her siblings and read:

“At the pink hour, when the eyes and back

Turn upward from the desk, when the human engine waits

Like a pony throbbing party…

"That's what's in the telegram." She paused, and scanned the horizon of the beach. Something caught her eye, and she gave her siblings a faint smile. "The real poem," she said, "goes like this:

"At the violet hour, when the eyes and back

Turn upward from the desk, when the human engine waits

Like a taxi throbbing waiting."

"Verse Fluctuation Declaration," Klaus said.

"Code," Sunny said.

"What are you talking about?" Mr. Poe demanded. "What is going on?"

"The missing words," Violet said to her siblings, as if the coughing banker had not spoken, "are '*violet,*' '*taxi,*' and '*waiting*.' We're not supposed to go with Mr. Poe. We're supposed to get into a taxi." She pointed across the beach, and the children could see, scarcely visible in the fog, a yellow car parked at a nearby curb. The Baudelaires nodded, and Violet turned to address the banker at last.

"We can't go with you," Violet said. "There's something else we need to do."

"Don't be absurd!" Mr. Poe sputtered. "I don't know where you've been, or how you got here, or why you're wearing a picture of Santa Claus on your shirts, but—"

"It's Herman Melville," Klaus said. "Goodbye, Mr. Poe."

"You are coming with me, young man!" Mr. Poe ordered.

“Sayonara,” Sunny said, and the three Baudelaires walked quickly across the beach, leaving the banker coughing in astonishment.

“Wait!” he ordered, when he put his handkerchief away. “Come back here, Baudelaires! You’re children! You’re youngsters! You’re orphans!”

Mr. Poe’s voice grew fainter and fainter as the children made their way across the sand. “What do you think the word ‘violet’ means?” Klaus murmured to his sister. “The taxi isn’t purple.”

“More code,” Sunny guessed.

“Maybe,” Violet said. “Or maybe Quigley just wanted to write my name.”

“Baudelaires!” Mr. Poe’s voice was almost inaudible, as if the Baudelaires had only dreamed he was there on the beach.

“Do you think he’s in the taxi, waiting for us?” Klaus asked.

“I hope so,” Violet said, and broke into a run. Her siblings hurried behind her as she ran across the sand, her boots showering sand with each step. “Quigley,” she said quietly, almost to herself, and then she said it louder. “Quigley! Quigley!”

At last the Baudelaires reached the taxi, but the windows of the car were tinted, a word which here means “darkened, so the children could not see who was inside.” “Quigley?” Violet asked, and flung open the door, but the children’s friend was not inside the taxi. In the driver’s seat was a woman the Baudelaires had never seen before, dressed in a long, black coat buttoned up all the way to her chin. On her hands were a pair of white cotton gloves, and in her lap were two slim books, probably to keep her company while she waited. The woman looked startled when the door opened, but when she spied the children she nodded politely, and gave them a very slight smile, as if she were not a stranger at all—but also not a friend. The smile she gave them was one you might give to an associate, or another member of an organization to which you belong. “Hello, Baudelaires,” she said, and gave the children a small wave. “Climb aboard.”

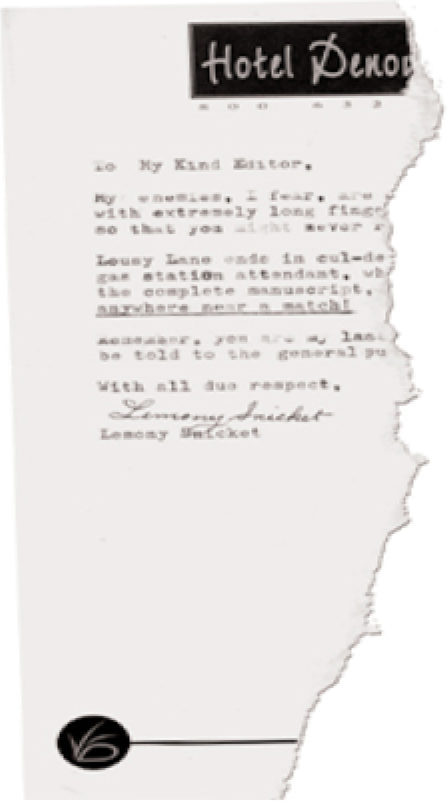
The Baudelaires looked at one another cautiously. They knew, of course, that one should never get into the car of a stranger, but they also knew that such rules do not necessarily apply in taxis, when the driver is almost always a stranger. Besides, when the woman had lifted her hand to wave, the children had spied the name of the books she had been reading to pass the time. There were two books of verse: *The Walrus and the Carpenter, and Other Poems,* by Lewis Carroll, and *The Waste Land,* by T. S. Eliot. Perhaps if one of the books had been by Edgar Guest, the children might have turned around and run back to Mr. Poe, but it is rare in this world to find someone who appreciates good poetry, and the children allowed themselves to hesitate.

“Who are you?” Violet asked, finally.

The woman blinked, and then gave the children her slight smile once more, as if she had expected the Baudelaires to answer the question themselves. “I’m Kit Snicket,” she said, and the Baudelaire orphans climbed aboard, turning the tables of their lives and breaking their unfortunate cycle for the very first time.

HOTEL D

To My Kind Editor



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To My Kind Editor,

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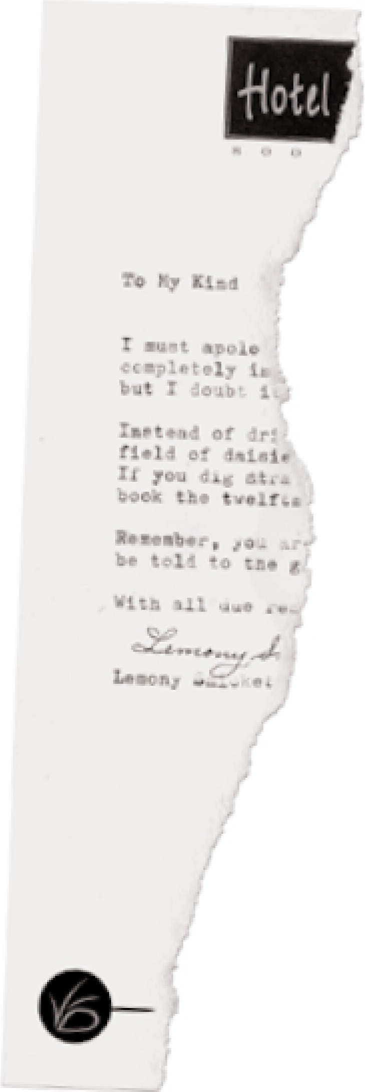

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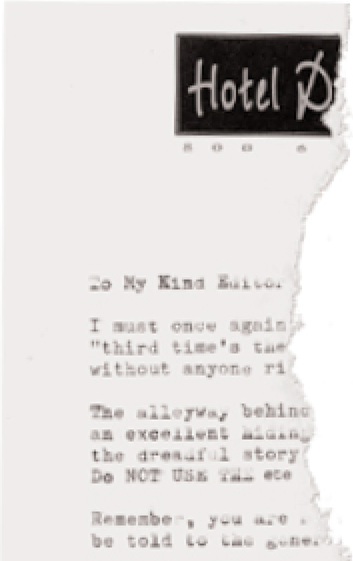

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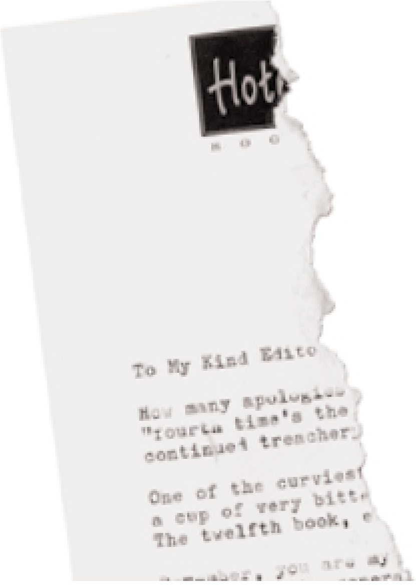

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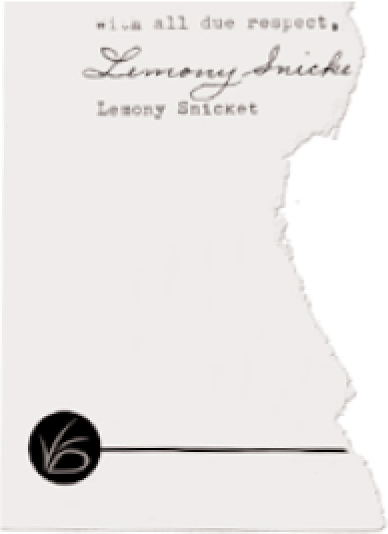

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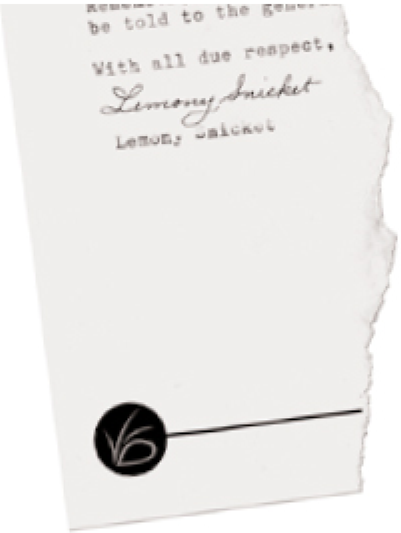

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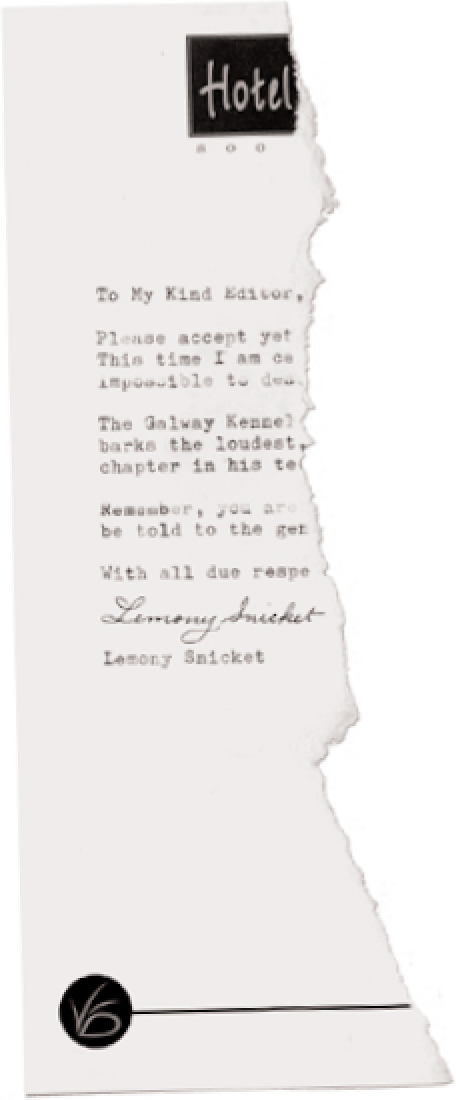

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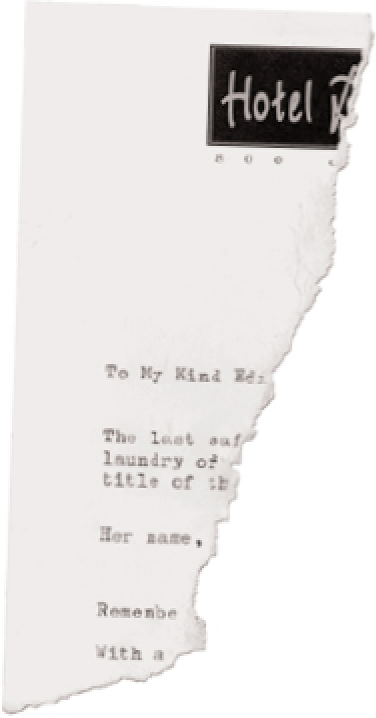

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A Series of Unfortunate Events

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THE AUSTERE ACADEMY

THE ERSATZ ELEVATOR

THE VILE VILLAGE

THE HOSTILE HOSPITAL

THE CARNIVOROUS CARNIVAL

THE SLIPPERY SLOPE

THE GRIM GROTTO

Credits

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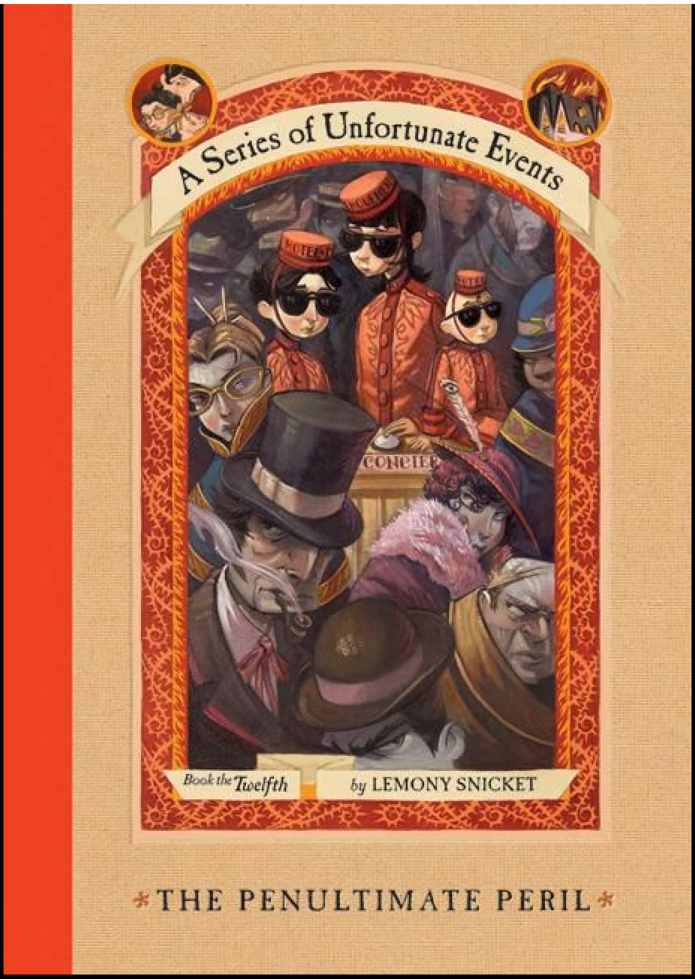
A Series of Unfortunate Events
Book the Twelfth
by LEMONY SNICKET
THE PENULTIMATE PERIL
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A Series of Unfortunate Events
BOOK the Twelfth

THE PENULTIMATE PERIL

***by* LEMONY SNICKET *Illustrations by* Brett Helquist**

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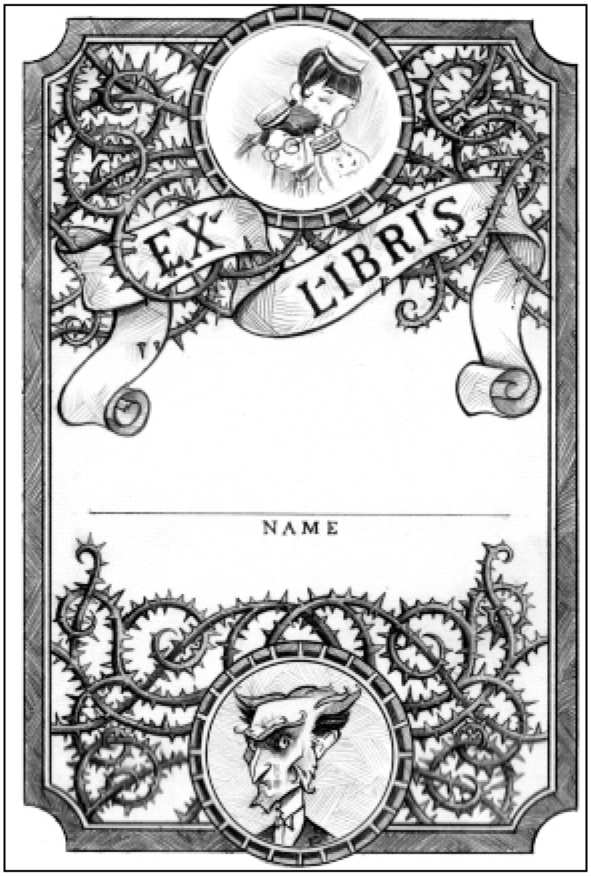
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Dear Reader

If this is the first book you found while searching for a book to read next, then the first thing you should know is that this next-to-last book is what you should put down first. Sadly, this book presents the next-to-last chronicle of the lives of the Baudelaire orphans, and it is next-tofirst in its supply of misery, despair, and unpleasantness.

Probably the next-to-last things you would like to read about are a harpoon gun, a rooftop sunbathing salon, two mysterious initials, three unidentified triplets, a notorious villain, and an unsavory curry.

Next-to-last things are the first thing to be avoided, and so allow me to recommend that you put this next-tolast book down first, and find something else to read next at last, such as the next-to-last book in another chronicle, or a chronicle containing other next-to-last things, so that this next-to-last book does not become the last book you will read.

With all due respect,

Lemony Snicket

Lemony Snicket

A Series of Unfortunate Events * LEMONY SNICKET *

For Beatrice—

No one could extinguish my love,

or your house.

CHAPTER
One

Certain people have said that the world is like a calm pond, and that anytime a person does even the smallest thing, it is as if a stone has dropped into the pond, spreading circles of ripples further and further out, until the entire world has been changed by one tiny action. If this is true, then the book you are reading now is the perfect thing to drop into a pond. The ripples will spread across the surface of the pond and the world will change for the better, with one less dreadful story for people to read and one more secret hidden at the bottom of a pond, where most people never think of looking. The miserable tale of the Baudelaire orphans will be safe in the pond's murky depths, and you will be happier not to read the grim story I have written, but instead to gaze at the rippling scum that rises to the top of the world.

The Baudelaires themselves, as they rode in the back of a taxi driven by a woman they scarcely knew, might have been happy to jump into a pond themselves, had they known what sort of story lay ahead of them as the automobile made its way among the twisting streets of the city where the orphans had once lived. Violet, Klaus, and Sunny Baudelaire gazed out of the windows of the car, marveling at how little the city had changed since a fire destroyed their home, took the lives of their parents, and created ripples in the Baudelaires' lives that would probably never become calm. As the taxi turned a corner, Violet saw the market where she and her siblings had shopped for ingredients to make dinner for Count Olaf, the notorious villain who had become their guardian after the fire. Even after all this time, with

Olaf trying scheme after scheme to get his hands on the enormous fortune the Baudelaire parents had left behind, the market looked the same as the day Justice Strauss, a kindly neighbor and a judge in the High Court, had first taken them there. Towering over the market was an enormous, shiny building that Klaus recognized as 667 Dark Avenue, where the Baudelaires had spent some time under the care of Jerome and Esmé Squalor in an enormous penthouse apartment. It seemed to the middle Baudelaire that the building had not changed one bit since the siblings had first discovered Esmé's treacherous and romantic attachment to Count Olaf. And Sunny Baudelaire, who was still small enough that her view out the window was somewhat restricted, heard the rattle of a manhole cover as the taxi drove over it, and remembered the underground passageway she and her siblings had discovered, which led from the basement of 667 Dark Avenue to the ashen remains of their own home. Like the market and the penthouse, the mystery of this passageway had not changed, even though the Baudelaires had discovered a secret organization known as V.F.D. that the children believed had constructed many such passageways. Each mystery the Baudelaires discovered only revealed another mystery, and another, and another, and several more, and another, as if the three siblings were diving deeper and deeper into a pond, and all the while the city lay calm on the surface, unaware of all the unfortunate events in the orphans' lives. Even now, returning to the city that was once their home, the Baudelaire orphans had solved few of the mysteries overshadowing them. They didn't know where they were headed, for instance, and they scarcely knew anything about the woman driving the automobile except her name.

"You must have thousands of questions, Baudelaires," said Kit Snicket, spinning the steering wheel with her white-gloved hands. Violet, who had adroit technical faculties—a phrase which here means "a knack for inventing mechanical devices"—admired the automobile's purring machinery as the taxi made a sharp turn through a large metal gate and proceeded down a curvy, narrow street lined with shrubbery. "I wish we had more time to talk, but it's already Tuesday. As it is you scarcely have time to eat your important brunch before getting into your concierge disguises and beginning your observations as flaneurs."

"Concierge?" Violet asked.

“Flaneurs?” Klaus asked.

“Brunch?” Sunny asked.

Kit smiled, and maneuvered the taxi through another sharp turn. Two books of poetry skittered off the passenger seat to the floor of the automobile—*The Walrus and the Carpenter, and Other Poems* by Lewis Carroll, and *The Waste Land* by T. S. Eliot. The Baudelaires had recently received a message in code, and had used the poetry of Mr. Carroll and Mr. Eliot in order to decode the message and meet Kit Snicket on Briny Beach, and now it seemed that perhaps Kit was still talking in riddles. “A great man once said that right, temporarily defeated, is stronger than evil triumphant. Do you understand what that means?”

Violet and Sunny turned to their brother, who was the literary expert in the family. Klaus Baudelaire had read so many books he was practically a walking library, and had recently taken to writing important and interesting facts in a dark blue commonplace book. “I think so,” the middle Baudelaire said. “He thinks that good people are more powerful than evil people, even if evil people appear to be winning. Is he a member of V.F.D.?”

“You might say that,” Kit said. “Certainly his message applies to our current situation. As you know, our organization split apart some time ago, with much bitterness on both sides.”

“The schism,” Violet said.

“Yes,” Kit agreed with a sigh. “The schism. V.F.D. was once a united group of volunteers, trying to extinguish fires—both literally and figuratively. But now there are two groups of bitter enemies. Some of us continue to extinguish fires, but others have turned to much less noble schemes.”

“Olaf,” Sunny said. The language skills of the youngest Baudelaire were still developing, but everyone in the taxi knew what Sunny meant when she uttered the name of the notorious villain.

“Count Olaf is one of our enemies,” Kit agreed, peering into her rearview mirror and frowning, “but there are many, many more who are equally wicked, or perhaps even more so. If I’m not mistaken, you met two of them in the mountains—a man with a beard, but no hair, and a woman with hair, but no beard. There are plenty more, with all sorts of hairstyles and facial ornaments. A long time ago, of course, you could spot members of V.F.D. by the tattoos on their ankles. But now there are so many wicked people it is impossible to keep track of all our enemies—and all the while they are keeping track of us. In fact, we may have some enemies behind us at this very moment.”

The Baudelaires turned to look out of the rear window, and saw another taxi driving behind them at quite a distance. Like Kit Snicket’s automobile, the windows of this taxi were tinted, and so the children could not see anything through the darkened glass.

“Why do you think there are enemies in that taxi?” Violet asked.

“A taxi will pick up anyone who signals for one,” Kit said. “There are countless wicked people in the world, so it follows that sooner or later a taxi will pick up a wicked person.”

“Or a noble one,” Klaus pointed out. “Our parents took a taxi to the opera one evening when their car wouldn’t start.”

“I remember that evening well,” Kit replied with a faint smile. “It was a performance of *La Forza del Destino.* Your mother was wearing a red shawl, with long feathers along the edges. During intermission I followed them to the snack bar and slipped them a box of poison darts before Esmé Squalor could catch me. It was difficult, but as one of my comrades likes to say, ‘To be daunted by no difficulty; to keep heart when all have lost it; to go through intrigue spotless; to forgo even ambition when the end is gained—who can say this is not greatness?’ And speaking of greatness, please hold on. We can’t allow a potential enemy to follow us to our important brunch.”

When someone says that their head is spinning, they are usually using an expression which means that they are very confused. Certainly the

Baudelaires had occasion to use the expression in this way, after listening to a person hurriedly summarizing the troubles of a splintered secret organization and quoting various historical figures on the subject of wickedness while driving a taxi hurriedly toward some mysterious, unexplained errands. But there are rare moments when the expression “My head is spinning” refers to a time when one’s head is actually spinning, and when Kit uttered the word “brunch,” one of these moments arrived. The steering wheel clasped firmly in her gloves, Kit turned the taxi so sharply that it spun off the road. The children’s heads—along with the rest of their bodies—spun along with the automobile as it veered into the dense, green shrubbery on the side of the road. When the taxi hit the shrubbery it kept spinning, and for a few seconds the siblings saw nothing but a green blur as the car spun through the shrubbery, and heard nothing but the crackle of branches as they scraped along the sides of the car, and felt nothing but relief that they had remembered to wear their seat belts, and then all of a sudden the Baudelaire heads stopped spinning, and they found themselves shaky but safe in a sloping lawn on the other side of the shrubbery, where the taxi had come to a stop. Kit turned off the engine and sighed deeply, leaning her head against the steering wheel.

“I probably shouldn’t do that,” she said, “in my condition.”

“Condition?” Sunny asked.

Kit lifted her head, and turned to fully face the Baudelaires for the first time since they had entered the car. She had a kind face, but there were lines of worry across her brow, and it looked like she hadn’t slept properly for quite some time. Her hair was long and messy, and she had two pencils stuck into it at odd angles. She was wearing a very elegant black coat, buttoned up all the way to her chin, but tucked into the lapel was a flower that had seen better days, a phrase which here means “had lost most of its petals and wilted considerably.” If the Baudelaires had been asked to guess Kit’s condition, they would have said she looked like a woman who had been through much hardship, and the Baudelaires wondered if their own hardships were equally clear in their faces and clothes. “I’m distraught,” Kit said, using a word which here means “sad and upset.” She opened the door of the taxi and sighed once more. “That’s my condition. I’m distraught, and I’m pregnant.”

She unhooked her seat belt and stepped out of the car, and the Baudelaires saw she had spoken the truth. Beneath her coat, her belly had a slight but definite curve, as happens when women are expecting children. When a woman is in such a condition, it is best to avoid strain, a word which here means “physical activity that might endanger either the woman or her future offspring.” Violet and Klaus could remember when their mother was pregnant with Sunny, and spent her free time lounging on the largest sofa in the Baudelaire library, with their father fetching lemonade and pumpernickel toast, or adjusting the pillows beneath her so she was comfortable. Occasionally, he would play one of their mother’s favorite pieces of music on the phonograph, and she would rise from the sofa and dance awkwardly, holding her growing belly and making funny faces at Violet and Klaus as they watched from the doorway, but for the most part the third Baudelaire pregnancy was spent in quiet relaxation. The Baudelaires felt certain their mother had never spun a taxicab through shrubbery during her pregnancy, and were sorry that Kit Snicket’s condition did not allow her to avoid the strain of such activities.

“Gather all of your things, Baudelaires,” Kit said, “and if you don’t mind, I’m going to ask you to carry my things, too—just some books and papers in the front seat. One should never leave any belongings in a taxi, because you can never be sure if you’ll see them again. Please be quick about it. Our enemies are likely to turn their taxi around and find us.”

Kit turned away from the Baudelaires and began to walk quickly down the sloping lawn, while the Baudelaires looked at one another in bewilderment.

“When we arrived at Briny Beach,” Violet said, “and saw the taxi waiting for us, just like the message said, I thought we were finally going to find answers to all of our questions. But I have more questions now than I ever did.”

“Me too,” Klaus said. “What does Kit Snicket want with us?”

“What did she mean by concierge disguises?” Violet said.

“What did she mean by observations as flaneurs?” Klaus asked.

“What’s so important about brunch?” Violet asked.

“How did she know we met those villains in the mountains?” Klaus asked.

“Where is Quigley Quagmire?” Violet asked, referring to a young man of whom the eldest Baudelaire was particularly fond, who had sent the coded message to the three children.

“Trust?” Sunny said quietly, and this was the most important question of all. By “trust,” the youngest Baudelaire meant something along the lines of, “Does Kit Snicket seem like a reliable person, and should we follow her?” and this is often a tricky question to ask about someone. Deciding whether or not to trust a person is like deciding whether or not to climb a tree, because you might get a wonderful view from the highest branch, or you might simply get covered in sap, and for this reason many people choose to spend their time alone and indoors, where it is harder to get a splinter. The Baudelaires did not know very much about Kit Snicket, and so it was difficult to know what their future would be if they followed her down the sloping lawn toward the mysterious errands she had mentioned.

“In the few minutes we’ve known her,” Violet said, “Kit Snicket has driven a taxicab into a mass of shrubbery. Normally I would be unwilling to trust such a person, but…”

“The poster,” Klaus said, as his sister’s voice trailed off. “I remember it, too. Mother said she purchased it during intermission, as a souvenir. She said it was the most interesting time she’d ever had at the opera, and she never wanted to forget it.”

“The poster had a picture of a gun,” Violet remembered, “with a trail of smoke forming the words of the title.”

Sunny nodded her head. “*La Forza del Destino,*” she said.

The three children gazed out at the sloping lawn. Kit Snicket had already walked quite some distance, without looking back to see if the children were following her. Without another word, the siblings reached into the passenger seat and gathered up Kit's things—the two books of poetry they had spotted earlier, and a cardboard folder brimming with papers. Then they turned and began walking across the lawn. From behind the hedges came a faint sound, but the children could not tell if it was a taxicab turning around, or just the wind rustling in the shrubbery.

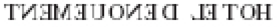
"La forza del destino" is an Italian phrase meaning "the force of destiny," and "destiny" is a word that tends to cause arguments among the people who use it. Some people think destiny is something you cannot escape, such as death, or a cheesecake that has curdled, both of which always turn up sooner or later. Other people think destiny is a time in one's life, such as the moment one becomes an adult, or the instant it becomes necessary to construct a hiding place out of sofa cushions. And still other people think that destiny is an invisible force, like gravity, or a fear of paper cuts, that guides everyone throughout their lives, whether they are embarking on a mysterious errand, doing a treacherous deed, or deciding that a book they have begun reading is too dreadful to finish. In the opera *La Forza del Destino,* various characters argue, fall in love, get married in secret, run away to monasteries, go to war, announce that they will get revenge, engage in duels, and drop a gun on the floor, where it goes off accidentally and kills someone in an incident eerily similar to one that happens in chapter nine of this very book, and all the while they are trying to figure out if any of these troubles are the result of destiny. They wonder and wonder at all the perils in their lives, and when the final curtain is brought down even the audience cannot be sure what all these unfortunate events may mean. The Baudelaire orphans did not know what perils lay ahead of them, as they followed Kit Snicket down the lawn, but they wondered—just as I wondered, on that fateful evening long ago, as I hurried out of the opera house before a certain woman could spot me—if it was the force of destiny that was guiding their story, or something even more mysterious, even more dangerous, and even more unfortunate.

CHAPTER Two

If you were to hold this book up to a mirror, you would see at once how confusing it is to read letters and words when they are reflected back In fact, the entire world looks confusing in a mirror, almost as if world beyond the shiny silver surface, exactly except backward. Life is perplexing enough without thinking about other worlds staring back at you from the mirror, which is why people who spend a great deal of time looking in the mirror tend to have trouble thinking about anything except whatever secrets they discover after so much reflection, such as a previously unknown sibling who was already watching them at that very moment.

The Baudelaire orphans, of course, had not spent very much time looking in mirrors recently, as they'd been quite preoccupied, a word which here means "in desperate and mysterious circumstances brought about by Count Olaf." But even if they had spent every waking moment staring at their own reflections, they would not have been prepared for the perplexing sight waiting for them at the end of the sloping lawn. When Violet, Klaus, and Sunny at last caught up with Kit Snicket, it felt as if they had stepped into the world on the opposite side of the mirror without even knowing it.

Impossible as it seemed, the lawn deposited the children at the roof of a building, but a building that lay flat on the ground instead of rising up toward the sky. The Baudelaires' shoes were inches from the roof's glittering shingles, where a large sign read HOTEL DENOUEMENT. Below the sign, farther from the orphans, was a row of windows with the number 9 emblazoned on each of their shutters. The row was very long, stretching out to the left and right of the Baudelaires, so far that they couldn't see the end of it. Below this row of windows was another with the number 8 emblazoned on the shutters, and then another row with 7, and so on and so on, the numbers getting farther and farther away from the Baudelaires, all the way down to 0. Protruding from one of the 0 windows was a strange funnel, which was spewing a thick, white fog toward the siblings, covering a set of stairs leading to a large, curved archway one story above, marked ENTRANCE. The building was constructed from strange, shimmering bricks, and here and there on the building were large, strange flowers and patches of dark green moss, which all lay out on the ground in front of the children.

After a moment, one of the shutters opened, and in an instant the Baudelaires realized why the Hotel Denouement seemed so perplexing. They had not been staring at the building at all, but at its reflection in an enormous pond. The actual hotel stood at the far end of the pond, and was reflected onto the pond's surface. Normally, of course, it is easy to tell a building from its reflection in a body of water, but whoever had designed the Hotel Denouement had added several features to confuse passersby. For one thing, the building did not stand up straight, but tilted toward the ground at a precise angle, so that the pond only reflected the hotel, and none of the surrounding landscape and sky. Also, all of the hotel's signage—which is simply a fancy word meaning "signs"—was written backward, so the numbers on the windows could only be read correctly in the pond, and the words on the roof of the actual hotel read . Finally, some hardworking gardener had managed to grow lilies and moss on the bricks of the hotel—the same sort of lilies and moss that grow on the surface of ponds. The three siblings looked down at the pond, and then up at the hotel, back and forth several times, before they were able to get their bearings, a phrase which here means "stop staring at this perplexing sight and direct their attention to Kit Snicket."

“Over here, Baudelaires!” the pregnant woman called, and the children saw that Kit had taken a seat on an enormous blanket laid out on the lawn. The blanket was heaped with enough food to feed an army, had an army decided that morning to invade a pond. There were three loaves of bread, each baked into a different shape, lined up in front of little bowls of butter, jam, and what looked like melted chocolate. Alongside the bread was an enormous basket containing all sorts of pastries, from muffins to donuts to custard eclairs, which happened to be a favorite of Klaus’s. There were two round tins containing quiche, which is a sort of pie made of eggs, cheese, and vegetables, and a large platter of smoked fish, and a wooden tray piled high with a pyramid of fruit. Three glass pitchers held three different kinds of juice, and there were silver pots containing coffee and tea, and laid out in a sort of fan was silverware with which to eat it all, and three napkins that were monogrammed, a word which here means “had the initials V. B., K. B., and S. B. embroidered on them.”

“Sit down, sit down,” Kit said, taking a bite of a pastry covered in powdered sugar. “As I said, we don’t have much time, but that’s no excuse for not eating well. Help yourselves to anything you like.”

“Where did all this food come from?” Klaus asked.

“One of our associates laid it out for us,” Kit said. “It is a policy of our organization that all picnics travel separately from the volunteers. If our enemies capture the picnic, they won’t get their clutches on us, and if our enemies capture us, they won’t get the picnic. That’s something to remember during the next couple of days, as you participate in what one of our enemies calls the ‘perpetual struggle for room and food.’ Please try the marmalade. It’s delicious.”

The Baudelaires felt dizzy, as if their heads were still spinning from the ride through the shrubbery, and Violet reached into her pocket to find a ribbon. The conversation was so bewildering that the eldest Baudelaire wanted to concentrate as hard as she did when she was dreaming up an invention. Tying her hair up helped Violet focus her inventing mind, but before she could find a ribbon, Kit smiled kindly at her, and produced a ribbon of her own. She gestured for the eldest Baudelaire to sit down, and with a gentle look in her eyes, the distraught and pregnant woman tied Violet's hair up herself.

"You look just like your father." Kit sighed. "He wore the same frown whenever he was confused, although he almost never tied his hair up in a ribbon when he solved a problem. Please, Baudelaires, eat your brunch, and I'll try to catch you up on our current predicament. By the time you're eating your second pastry I hope your questions will be answered."

The Baudelaires sat down, spread their monogrammed napkins on their laps, and began to eat, surprised to find that they were just as hungry for brunch as they were curious for information. Violet took two slices of dark wheat bread and made herself a sandwich of smoked fish, deciding to try the chocolate spread afterward if she still had room. Klaus served himself some quiche and took a custard eclair, and Sunny rooted through the tray of fruit until she found a grapefruit, which she began to peel with her unusually sharp teeth. Kit smiled at the children, dabbed at her own mouth with a napkin embroidered with K. S., and began to speak.

"The building at the other end of the pond is the Hotel Denouement," she began. "Have you ever stayed there?"

"No," Violet said. "Our parents took us to the Hotel Preludio once for the weekend."

"That's right," Klaus said. "I'd almost forgotten."

"Carrots for breakfast," Sunny said, remembering the weekend with a smile.

"Well, the Hotel Preludio is a lovely place," Kit said, "but the Hotel Denouement is more than that. For years, it's been a place where our volunteers can gather to exchange information, discuss plans to defeat our enemies, and return books we've borrowed from one another. Before the schism, there were countless places that served such purposes. Bookstores and banks, restaurants and stationery stores, cafés and laundromats, opium dens and geodesic domes—people of nobility and integrity could gather nearly everywhere."

“Those must have been wonderful times,” Violet said.

“So I’m told,” Kit said. “I was four years old when everything changed. Our organization shattered, and it was as if the world shattered, too, and one by one the safe places were destroyed. There was a large scientific laboratory, but the volunteer who owned the place was murdered. There was an enormous cavern, but a treacherous team of realtors claimed it for themselves. And there was an immense headquarters high in the Mortmain Mountains, but—”

“It was destroyed,” Klaus said quietly. “We were there shortly after the fire.”

“Of course you were,” Kit said. “I’d forgotten. Well, the headquarters was the penultimate safe place.”

“Penulhoo?” Sunny asked.

“‘Penultimate’ means ‘next-to-last,’” Kit explained. “When the mountain headquarters was destroyed, only the Hotel Denouement was left. In every other place on Earth, nobility and integrity are vanishing quickly.” She sighed, and gazed out at the still, flat surface of the pond. “If we’re not careful, they’ll vanish completely. Can you imagine a world in which wickedness and deception were running rampant?”

“Yes,” Violet said quietly, and her siblings nodded in agreement. They knew that the word “rampant” meant “without anyone to stop it,” and they could imagine such a world very easily, because they had been living in one. Since their first encounter with Count Olaf, the villain’s wickedness and deception had run rampant all over the Baudelaires’ lives, and it had been very difficult for the children to keep from becoming villains themselves. In fact, when they considered all of their recent actions, they weren’t entirely sure they hadn’t performed a few acts of villainy, even if they’d had very good reasons for doing so.

“When we were in the mountains,” Klaus said, “we found a message one of the volunteers had written. It said that V.F.D. would be gathering at the Hotel Denouement on Thursday.”

Kit nodded, and reached to pour herself some more coffee. “Was the message addressed to J. S.?” she asked.

“Yes,” Violet said. “We assumed the initials stood for Jacques Snicket.”

“Brother?” Sunny asked.

Kit looked sadly down at her pastry. “Yes, Jacques was my brother. Because of the schism, I haven’t seen either of my brothers for years, and it was only recently that I learned of his murder.”

“We met Jacques very briefly,” Violet said, referring to the time the Baudelaires had spent in the care of an entire village. “You must have been shocked to receive the news.”

“Saddened,” Kit said, “but not shocked. So many good people have been slain by our enemies.” She reached across the blanket and patted the hands of all three Baudelaires in turn. “I know I don’t have to tell you how terrible it feels to lose a family member. I felt so terrible that I vowed I would never leave my bed.”

“What happened?” Klaus said.

Kit smiled. “I got hungry,” she said, “and when I opened the refrigerator, I found another message waiting for me.”

“Verbal Fridge Dialogue,” Violet said, “the same code as the message we found in the mountains.”

“Yes,” Kit said. “You three had been spotted by another volunteer. We knew, of course, that you children had nothing to do with my brother’s death, no matter what that ridiculous reporter wrote in *The Daily Punctilio*.”

The Baudelaires looked at one another. They had almost forgotten about Geraldine Julienne, a journalist who had caused them much inadvertent trouble, a phrase which here means “published in the newspaper that the Baudelaire orphans had murdered Jacques Snicket, whom she mistakenly identified as Count Olaf.” The siblings had found it necessary to disguise themselves several times so as not to be captured by the authorities. “Who spotted us?” Klaus asked.

“Quigley Quagmire, of course,” she said. “He found you in the Mortmain Mountains, and then managed to contact me when you were separated from him. He and I managed to meet each other in an abandoned bathrobe emporium, where we disguised ourselves as mannequins while we figured out what to do next. Finally, we managed to send a Volunteer Factual Dispatch to Captain Widdershins’s submarine.”

“*Queequeg,*” Sunny said, naming the underwater vehicle where she and her siblings had recently spent a dreadful few days.

“Our plan was to meet up with you at Briny Beach,” Kit said, “and proceed to the Hotel Denouement for the V.F.D. gathering.”

“But where is Quigley?” Violet asked.

Kit sighed, and took a sip of her coffee. “He was very eager to see you,” she said, “but he received word from his siblings.”

“Duncan and Isadora!” Klaus cried. “We haven’t seen them for quite some time. Are they safe?”

“I hope so,” Kit answered. “The message they sent was incomplete, but it sounded as if they were being attacked in midair while flying over the sea. Quigley went to help them immediately in a helicopter we stole from a nearby botanist. If all goes well, you’ll see all three Quagmire triplets on Thursday. That is, unless you cancel the gathering.”

“Cancel it?” Violet asked. “Why would we do a thing like that?”

“The last safe place may not be safe after all,” Kit said sadly. “If that’s the case, you Baudelaires will need to send V.F.D. a signal that Thursday’s gathering is canceled.”

“Why not safe?” Sunny asked.

Kit smiled at the youngest Baudelaire, opened the cardboard folder that the Baudelaires had retrieved from the taxicab, and began to page through the papers inside. “I’m sorry this is so disorganized,” she said. “I haven’t had time to update my commonplace book. My brother used to say that if only one had a little more time to do some important reading, all the secrets in the world would become clear. I’ve scarcely looked at these maps, poems, and blueprints that Charles sent me, or chosen wallpaper for the baby’s room. Wait one moment, Baudelaires. I’ll find it.”

The children helped themselves to more brunch, trying to be patient as Kit looked through her folder, pausing from time to time to smooth out the particularly crumpled papers. At last she held up a tiny piece of paper, no bigger than a caterpillar, which was rolled into a tiny scroll. “Here it is,” she said. “A waiter slipped this to me last night by hiding it inside a cookie.”

She handed it to Klaus, who unrolled the paper and squinted at it behind his glasses. “‘J. S. has checked in,’” he read out loud, “‘and requested tea with sugar. My brother sends his regards. Sincerely, Frank.’”

“Usually the messages inside the cookies are just superstitious nonsense,” Kit said, “but recently the restaurant has changed management. You can understand why this message made me so distraught, Baudelaires. Someone is posing as my brother, and has checked into the hotel shortly before our entire organization is scheduled to arrive.”

“Count Olaf,” Violet said.

“It could be Olaf,” Kit agreed, “but there are plenty of villains who are all too eager to be impostors. Those two villains in the mountains, for example.”

“Or Hugo, Colette, or Kevin,” Klaus said, naming three people the children had met at Caligari Carnival, who had since joined Olaf’s troupe and had agreed to meet him at the hotel.

“But this J. S. isn’t necessarily a wicked person,” Kit said. “Plenty of noble people would check into the Hotel Denoument and order sugar in their tea. Not to sweeten it, of course—tea should be as bitter as wormwood, my brother used to say, and as sharp as a two-edged sword—but as a signal. Our comrades and our enemies are all after the same thing—the Vessel For Disaccharides."

"Sugar bowl," Sunny said, sharing a look of dismay with her siblings. The Baudelaires knew that Kit was referring to a sugar bowl that was of great importance to V.F.D. and to Count Olaf, who was desperate to get his hands on it. The children had searched for this sugar bowl from the highest peak of the Mortmain Mountains to the underwater depths of the Gorgonian Grotto, but had neither found this sugar bowl nor learned why it was so important.

"Exactly," Kit said. "The sugar bowl is on its way to the hotel even as we speak, and I'd hate to think what would happen if our enemies got ahold of it. I can't imagine anything worse, except perhaps if our enemies somehow got ahold of the Medusoid Mycelium."

The Baudelaires' look of dismay augmented, a word which here means "increased dramatically as they realized they had some bad news for Kit Snicket." "I'm afraid that Count Olaf has a small sample of the Medusoid Mycelium," Violet said, referring to a deadly fungus the children had encountered while exploring the ocean. Its sinister spores had infected poor Sunny, who might not have survived had her siblings not managed to dilute the poison in the nick of time. "We had a few spores locked tight in a diving helmet, but Olaf managed to steal it."

Kit gasped. "Then we most certainly have no time to lose. The three of you must infiltrate the Hotel Denouement and observe J. S. If J. S. is a noble person, then you must make sure that the sugar bowl falls into his or her hands, but if J. S. is a villainous person, you must make sure it does not. And I'm sad to say that this won't be as easy as it sounds."

"It doesn't sound easy at all," Klaus said.

"That's the spirit," Kit said, popping a grape into her mouth. "Of course, you won't be alone. Showing up early is one of the signs of a noble person, so there are other volunteers already at the hotel. You may even recognize some volunteers who have been observing you during your travels. But you also may recognize some of your enemies, as they will be posing as noble people by showing up early as well. While you try to observe the impostor, various impostors will undoubtedly be observing you."

"But how can we tell the volunteers from the enemies?" Violet asked.

"The same way you always do," Kit said. "When you first met Count Olaf, did you have any doubt he was a treacherous person? When you first met the Quagmire triplets, did you have any doubt that they were charming and resourceful? You'll have to observe everyone you see, and make such judgements yourselves. You Baudelaires will become flaneurs."

"Expound," Sunny said, which meant something along the lines of, "I'm afraid I don't know what that word means."

"Flaneurs," Kit explained, "are people who quietly observe their surroundings, intruding only when it is absolutely necessary. Children make excellent flaneurs, as so few people notice them. You'll be able to pass unnoticed in the hotel."

"We can't pass unnoticed," Klaus said. "*The Daily Punctilio* has published our photographs in the paper. Someone is sure to recognize us and report our presence to the authorities."

"My brother's right," Violet said. "Three children just can't go wandering around a hotel observing things."

Kit smiled, and lifted one corner of the picnic blanket. Underneath were three parcels wrapped in paper. "The man who sent me the message about the impostor," she said, "is a member of V.F.D. He suggested that he hire the three of you as concierges. Your uniforms are in these packets."

"Expound again," Sunny said.

Klaus had taken out his commonplace book and was taking notes on what Kit was saying. The opportunity to define a word, however, was enough to interrupt his research. "A concierge," he said to his sister, "is someone who performs various tasks for guests in the hotel."

"It's the perfect disguise," Kit said. "You'll be doing everything from fetching packages to recommending restaurants. You'll be allowed in every corner of the hotel, from the rooftop sunbathing salon to the laundry room in the basement, and no one will suspect you're there to spy on them. Frank will help you as best he can, but be very careful. The schism has turned many brothers into enemies. Under no circumstances should you reveal your true selves to Frank's treacherous identical brother Ernest."

"Identical?" Violet repeated. "If they're identical, how can we tell them apart?"

Kit took one last sip of her coffee. "Please try to pay attention," she said. "You'll have to observe everyone you see, and make such judgements yourselves. That's the only way to tell a villain from a volunteer. Now, is everything perfectly clear?"

The Baudelaires looked at one another. They could not remember a time in their lives when everything had been less clear than at this very moment, when every sentence Kit uttered seemed to be more mysterious than the last. Klaus looked at the notes he had made in his commonplace book, and tried to summarize the errand Kit had outlined for them. "We're going to disguise ourselves as concierges," he said carefully, "in order to become flaneurs and observe an impostor who is either a volunteer or an enemy."

"A man named Frank is going to help us," Violet said, "but his brother Ernest will try to stop us."

"There are several other volunteers in the hotel," Klaus said, "but several other enemies as well."

"Sugar bowl," Sunny said.

"Very good," Kit said approvingly. "When you're done with your brunch, you can change into your uniforms behind that tree, and signal to Frank that you're on your way. Do you have something you can throw into the pond?"

Violet reached into her pocket and drew out a stone she had picked up on Briny Beach. “I imagine this will do,” she said.

“That’s perfect,” Kit said. “Frank should be watching from one of the windows of the hotel, unless of course Ernest has intercepted my message and is watching instead. In any case, when you’re ready to meet him, you can throw the rock into the pond, and he’ll see the ripples and know you’re on your way.”

“Aren’t you coming with us?” Klaus asked.

“I’m afraid not,” Kit said. “I have other errands to perform. While Quigley tries to resolve the situation in the sky, I will try to resolve the situation in the sea, and you’ll have to resolve the situation here on land.”

“Us alone?” Sunny asked. She meant something along the lines of, “Do you really think three children can accomplish all this by themselves?” and her siblings were quick to translate.

“Look at yourselves,” Kit said, and gestured toward the pond. The Baudelaires stood up and stepped close to the water’s edge, and leaned over the pond so their reflections appeared in front of the roof of the hotel. “When your parents died,” Kit said, “you were just a young girl, Violet. But you’ve matured. Those aren’t the eyes of a young girl. They’re the eyes of someone who has faced endless hardship. And look at you, Klaus. You have the look of an experienced researcher—not just the young reader who lost his parents in a fire. And Sunny, you’re standing on your own two feet, and so many of your teeth are growing in that they don’t appear to be of such unusual size, as they were when you were a baby. You’re not children anymore, Baudelaires. You’re volunteers, ready to face the challenges of a desperate and perplexing world. You must go to the Hotel Denouement, and Quigley must go to the self-sustaining hot air mobile home, and I must go to a coral formation of dubious quality where an inflatable raft should be waiting. But if Quigley manages to construct a net big enough to capture all those eagles, and I manage to contact Captain Widdershins and have him meet me at a certain clump of seaweed, we’ll be here on Thursday. Hector should manage to land his self-sustaining hot air mobile home on the roof, even with all of us aboard.”

“Hector?” Violet said, remembering the man who had been so kind to them in the Village of Fowl Devotees, and his enormous invention that had carried him away from the Baudelaires. “He’s safe?”

“I hope so,” Kit said quietly, and stood up. She turned her face from the Baudelaires, and her voice seemed to tremble as she talked. “Don’t worry about the brunch things, Baudelaires. One of my comrades has volunteered to clean up after our picnic. He’s a wonderful gentleman. You’ll meet him on Thursday, if all goes well. If all goes well—”

But she could not finish her sentence. Instead, she gave a little whimper, and her shoulders began to shake as the Baudelaires looked at one another. When someone is crying, of course, the noble thing to do is to comfort them. But if someone is trying to hide their tears, it may also be noble to pretend you do not notice them, so they will not be embarrassed. For a moment, the children could not choose between the noble activity of comforting a crying person and the noble activity of not embarrassing a crying person, but as Kit Snicket began to cry harder and harder they decided to comfort her. Violet clasped one of her hands. Klaus put an arm around her shoulder. Sunny hugged Kit above the knees, which was as high as she could reach.

“Why are you crying?” Violet asked. “Why are you so distraught?”

“Because all will not go well,” Kit said finally. “You may as well know that now, Baudelaires. These are dark days, as dark as a crow flying through a pitch black night. Our errands may be noble, but we will not succeed. I suspect that before Thursday, I’ll see your signal and know that all our hopes have gone up in smoke.”

“But how will we signal?” Klaus asked. “Which code should we use?”

“Any code you devise,” Kit said. “We’ll be watching the skies.”

With that, she shook herself out of the children’s comforting arms, and hurried away from the pond without another word to the siblings. Violet, Klaus, and Sunny watched her figure get smaller and smaller as she ran up the lawn, perhaps on her way back to the taxicab, or to join up with another mysterious volunteer, until at last she disappeared over the slope. For a moment none of the children said a word, and then Sunny reached down and picked up the parcels.

"Change?" she asked.

"I guess so," Violet said with a sigh. "It seems a shame to waste all this food, but I can't eat any more brunch."

"Perhaps the volunteer who is cleaning it up will bring it to someone else," Klaus said.

"Perhaps," Violet agreed. "There's so much about V.F.D. that remains a mystery."

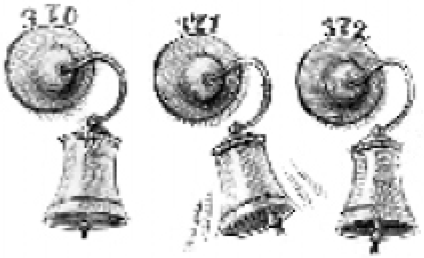
"Perhaps we'll learn more when we're flaneurs," Klaus said. "If we observe everything around us, perhaps some of these mysteries will become clear. I hope so."

"I hope so, too," Violet said.

"Also hope so," Sunny said, and the Baudelaires said no more. Leaving their brunch behind, they ducked behind the tree Kit had suggested, and held up the picnic blanket as a sort of curtain, so each child could change into a concierge disguise in relative privacy. Violet buckled a shiny silver belt with the words HOTEL DENOUEMENT printed in large, black letters all the way around it, and hoped that she would be able to tell the difference between Frank and his treacherous brother Ernest. Klaus adjusted his stiff, round hat, which had a firm elastic band that tucked under the chin, and hoped he would know which of the guests were volunteers and which were villains. And Sunny slipped her fingers into the clean white gloves, surprised that Frank had managed to find them in such a small size, and hoped that she would be able to investigate the impostor posing as Jacques Snicket.

When the three children were all wearing their uniforms, they walked back to the edge of the pond and put on the last part of their disguises: three enormous pairs of sunglasses, reminding them of a disguise Count Olaf had worn when pretending to be a detective. The sunglasses were so large that they covered not only their eyes but a great portion of their faces—Klaus could even wear his regular glasses underneath them without anyone noticing. As they gazed through the sunglasses at their own reflections, they wondered if the disguises were enough to keep them out of the hands of the authorities long enough to solve all the mysteries that surrounded them, and they wondered if it was true what Kit Snicket had said, that they weren't children anymore, but volunteers ready to face the challenges of a desperate and perplexing world. The Baudelaires hoped so. But when Violet took the stone in her gloved hand, and threw it out into the middle of the pond, they wondered if their hopes would sink in the same way. They watched as the surface of the pond rippled, disrupting the reflection of the hotel. The children watched the shingles of the roof turn into a blur, and they watched the word "Denouement" disappear as if it were written on a piece of paper someone was crumpling in their hand. They watched each row of windows melt together, and they watched all the flowers and moss dissolve into nothing as the stone sank deeper and deeper into the pond, and the circular ripples spread further and further across the reflection. The Baudelaire orphans watched this reflected world disappear, and wondered if their hopes would also disappear, into the strange, rippling world of the Hotel Denouement and all the mysteries and secrets that lay deep inside.

CHAPTER
Three



There are places where the world is quiet, but the enormous lobby of the Hotel Denouement was not one of them. On the day the Baudelaires walked up the stairs through the white fog from the funnel and entered the large, curved archway marked ƎƆИAЯTИƎ—or when reflected in the enormous pond, ENTRANCE—the lobby was bustling with activity. As Kit Snicket had predicted, the Baudelaires were able to pass unnoticed in the hotel, because everyone was far too busy to notice anything. Guests were lined up in front of a huge reception desk—which for some reason had the number 101 emblazoned on the wall above it—so they could check into the hotel and go to their rooms to freshen up. Bellboys and bellgirls were loading piles of luggage onto carts and rolling them toward the elevators—which for some reason had the number 118 emblazoned on their doors—so they could drop off the suitcases in the guests' rooms and collect their tips. Waiters and waitresses were bringing food and drink to people who were sitting on the chairs and benches of the lobby, waiting for refreshment. Taxi drivers were ushering guests into the lobby to join the line, and dogs were dragging their owners out of the lobby to take walks. Confused tourists were standing around looking quizzically at maps, and rambunctious children were playing hide-and-seek among the potted plants. A man in a tuxedo was sitting at a grand piano emblazoned with the number 152, playing tinkly tunes to amuse anyone who cared to listen, and members of the cleaning staff were discreetly polishing the green wooden floors etched with the number 123, for anyone who cared to see their feet reflected with every step. There was an enormous fountain in one corner of the room, releasing a cascade of water that ran over the number 131 in a shiny, smooth wall, and there was an enormous woman in the opposite corner, standing under the number 176 and shouting a man's name over and over in an increasingly annoyed tone of voice. The Baudelaires tried to be flaneurs as they walked across the chaos of the lobby, but there was so much to observe, and all of it was moving so quickly, that they wondered how they could even get started on their noble errand.

"I had no idea this place would be so busy," Violet said, blinking at the lobby from behind her sunglasses.

"How in the world will we be able to observe the impostor," Klaus wondered, "among all these possible suspects?"

"Frank first," Sunny said.

"Sunny's right," Violet said. "The first step in our errand should be locating our new employer. If he saw our signal from that open window, he should be expecting us."

"Unless his villainous brother Ernest is expecting us instead," Klaus said.

"Or both," Sunny said.

"Why do you suppose there are so many numbers—" Violet started to ask, but before she could finish her question a man came bounding up to them. He was very tall and skinny, and his arms and legs stuck out at odd angles, as if he were made of drinking straws instead of flesh and bone. He was dressed in a uniform similar to that of the Baudelaires', but with the word MANAGER printed in fancy script over one of the pockets of his coat.

"You must be the new concierges," he said. "Welcome to the Hotel Denouement. I'm one of the managers."

"Frank," Violet asked, "or Ernest?"

"Exactly," the man said, and winked at them. "I'm so happy the three of you are here, even if one of you is unusually short, because we're unusually short-handed. I'm so busy you'll have to figure out the system for yourself."

"System?" Klaus asked.

"This place is as complicated as it is enormous," said Frank, or perhaps Ernest, "and vice versa. I'd hate to think what would happen if you didn't understand it."

The Baudelaires looked carefully at their new manager, but his face was utterly unfathomable, a word which here means "blank, so the Baudelaires could not tell if he was giving them a friendly warning or a sinister threat." "We'll try our best," Violet said quietly.

"Good," said the manager, leading the children across the enormous lobby. "You'll be at our guests' beck and call," he continued, using a phrase which meant that the guests would boss the Baudelaires around. "If anyone and everyone staying here asks for assistance, you'll immediately volunteer to help them."

"Excuse me, sir," interrupted one of the bellboys. He was holding a suitcase in each hand and wearing a confused expression on his face. "This luggage arrived in a taxi, but the driver said the guest wouldn't arrive until Thursday. What should I do?"

"Thursday?" said Frank or Ernest with a frown. "Excuse me, concierges. I don't suppose I have to tell you how important this is. I'll be right back."

The manager followed the bellboy into the crowd, leaving the Baudelaires standing alone next to a large, wooden bench marked with the number 128. Klaus ran his hand along the bench, which was etched with rings, from people setting down glasses without using coasters. "Do you think we were talking to Frank," Klaus said, "or Ernest?"

"I don't know," Violet said. "He used the word 'volunteer.' Maybe that was some sort of a code."

"Thursinterest," Sunny said, which meant "He knew that Thursday was important."

"That's true," Klaus said, "but is it important to him because he's a volunteer or a villain?"

Before either Baudelaire sister could hazard a guess, a phrase which here means "attempt to answer Klaus's question," the tall, skinny manager reappeared at their sides. "You must be the new concierges," he said, and the children realized that this was the other brother. "Welcome to the Hotel Denouement."

"You must be Ernest," Violet tried.

"Or Frank," Sunny said.

"Yes," the manager said, although it was not at all clear with whom he was agreeing. "I'm very grateful you three are here. The hotel is quite busy at the moment, and we're expecting more guests to arrive on Thursday. Now, you'll be stationed at the concierge desk, number 175, right over here. Follow me."

The children followed him to the far wall of the lobby, where a large wooden desk sat under the number 175, which was painted over an enormous window. On the desk was a small lamp shaped like a frog, and out the window, the children could see the gray, flat horizon of the sea. "We've got a pond on one side of us," said Ernest, unless of course it was Frank, "and the sea on the other side. It doesn't sound very safe, and yet some people think this is a very safe place indeed." Frank, unless it was Ernest, looked around hurriedly and lowered his voice. "What do you think?"

Once again, the manager's face was unfathomable, and the children could not tell if his reference to a safe place made him a volunteer or a villain. “Hmm,” Sunny said, which is often a safe answer, even though it is not really an answer at all.

“Hmm,” Frank or Ernest said in response. “Now then, let me explain how this hotel is organized.”

“Excuse me, sir,” said a bellgirl, whose face could not be seen behind the pile of newspapers she was carrying. “The latest edition of *The Daily Punctilio* has arrived.”

“Let me see,” said either Ernest or Frank, plucking a copy from the top of the pile. “I heard that Geraldine Julienne has written an update on the Baudelaire case.”

The Baudelaire orphans froze, scarcely daring to look at one another, let alone the volunteer or villain who was standing beside them reading the headline out loud. “‘BAUDELAIRES RUMORED TO RETURN TO THE CITY,’” he said. “‘According to information recently discovered by this reporter when opening a cookie, Veronica, Klyde, and Susie Baudelaire, the notorious murderers of renowned actor Count Omar, are returning to the city, perhaps to commit more vicious murders or to continue their recent hobby of arson. Citizens are advised to watch for these three bloodthirsty children, and to report them to the authorities if they are spotted. If they are not spotted, citizens are advised to do nothing.’” The manager turned to the Baudelaires, his face as unfathomable as ever. “What do you think of that, concierges?”

“That’s an interesting question,” Klaus replied, which is another very safe answer.

“I’m glad you find it interesting,” Ernest or Frank replied, which was an equally safe answer to Klaus’s safe answer. Then he turned to the bellgirl. “I’ll show you the newsstand in Room 168,” he said, and disappeared with the newspapers into the crowd, leaving the Baudelaires alone, standing at the desk and staring out to sea.

“I think that was Ernest,” Violet said. “His comment about the hotel’s safety sounded very sinister.”

"But he didn't seem alarmed by the story in *The Daily Punctilio,*" Klaus said. "If Ernest is an enemy of V.F.D., he'd be on the watch for us. So that man was probably Frank."

"Maybe he just didn't recognize us," Violet said. "After all, few people recognize Count Olaf when he's in disguise, and his disguises aren't much better than ours. Maybe we look more like concierges than Baudelaires."

"Or maybe we don't look like Baudelaires at all," Klaus said. "As Kit said, we're not children anymore."

"Nidiculous," Sunny said, which meant something like, "I think I'm still a child."

"That's true," Klaus admitted, smiling down at his sister, "but the older we get, the less likely it is that we'll be recognized."

"That should make it easier to do our errands," Violet said.

"What do you mean by that?" asked a familiar voice, and the Baudelaires saw that either Frank or Ernest had returned.

"What my associate meant," Klaus said, thinking quickly, "is that it would be easier for us to start our work as concierges if you explained how the hotel is organized."

"I just said I would do that," said Frank in an annoyed voice, or Ernest in an irritated one. "Once you understand how the Hotel Denouement works, you'll be able to perform your errands as easily as you would find a book in a library. And if you can find a book in a library, then you already know how this hotel works."

"Expound," Sunny said.

"The Hotel Denouement is organized according to the Dewey Decimal System," Frank or Ernest explained. "That's the same way books are organized in many libraries. For instance, if you wanted to find a book on German poetry, you would begin in the section of the library marked 800, which contains books on literature and rhetoric. Similarly, the eighth story of this hotel is reserved for our rhetorical guests. Within the 800 section of a library, you'd find books on German poetry labeled 831, and if you were to take the elevator up to the eighth story and walk into Room 831, you'd find a gathering of German poets. Understand?"

"I think so," said Klaus. All three Baudelaires had spent enough time in libraries to be familiar with the Dewey Decimal System, but even Klaus's vast experience in research did not mean he had committed the entire system to memory. It is not necessary, of course, to memorize the Dewey Decimal System in order to use a library, as most libraries have catalogs, in which all of the books are listed on cards or on a computer screen to make them easier to find. "Where can we find the catalog for the Hotel Denouement's services?"

"Catalog?" repeated either Frank or Ernest. "You shouldn't need a catalog. The entire 100 section of a library is dedicated to philosophy and psychology, and so is the first story of our hotel, from the reception desk, which is labeled 101 for the theory of philosophy, to the concierge desk, which is labeled 175 for the ethics of recreation and leisure, to the couches over there, which are labeled 135, for dreams and mysteries, in case our guests want to take a nap or conceal something underneath the sofa cushions. The second story is the 200s, for religion, and we have a church, a cathedral, a chapel, a synagogue, a mosque, a temple, a shrine, a shuffleboard court, and Room 296, which is currently occupied by a somewhat cranky rabbi. The third story is the social sciences, where we have placed our ballrooms and meeting rooms; the fourth story is dedicated to language, so most of our foreigners stay there. The 500s are dedicated to mathematics and science, and the sixth story is dedicated to technology, from the sauna in Room 613, which stands for the promotion of health, to Room 697, which is where we keep the controls for heating, ventilation, and air conditioning. Now, if the seventh story stands for the arts, what do you think we would find in Room 792, which stands for stage presentations?"

Violet wanted to tie her hair up in a ribbon to help her think, but she was afraid of being recognized. "A theater?" she said.

"You've obviously visited a library before," the manager said, although the children could not tell if he was complimenting them or getting suspicious. "I'm afraid that's not true of all of our guests, so when they are in need of any of our services, they ring for a concierge instead of wandering around the hotel by themselves. In the next day or so, you'll probably walk through every section of the hotel, from the astronomy observatory in Room 999 to the employees' quarters in the basement, Room 000."

"Is that where we sleep?" Klaus asked.

"Well, you're on duty twenty-four hours a day," Ernest said, or perhaps it was Frank. "But the hotel gets very quiet at night, when the guests go to sleep, or stay up all night reading. You can nap behind the desk, and when someone rings for you it will serve as an alarm clock."

Frank stopped talking, or perhaps it was Ernest, and quickly looked around the room before leaning in close to the Baudelaires. The three siblings nervously looked back at Ernest through their sunglasses, or maybe it was Frank. "Your positions as concierges," he said in his unfathomable tone, "are excellent opportunities for you to quietly observe your surroundings. People tend to treat the hotel staff as if they are invisible, so you will have the chance to see and hear quite a lot of interesting things. However, you should remember that you will also have many opportunities to be observed. Do I make myself clear?"

This time it was Violet who needed to give a safe answer. "Hmm," she said. "That's an interesting question."

Either Frank or Ernest narrowed his eyes at the oldest Baudelaire, and seemed about to say something when the Baudelaires suddenly heard some loud, piercing ringing sounds. "Aha!" the manager cried. "Your work has begun!"

The siblings followed Ernest or Frank around to the other side of the desk, and Frank or Ernest pointed to a vast network of tiny bells, each no larger than a thimble, which lined the back of a desk where knobs for drawers might otherwise be. Each bell had a number on it, from 000 to 999, with one extra bell that had no number at all. This extra bell was ringing, along with the bell numbered 371 and the bell numbered 674.

“Ring!” cried either Ernest or Frank. “Ring! I shouldn’t have to tell you the bell’s your signal. We can’t keep our guests waiting for even an instant. You can tell which guest is ringing by the number on the bell. If the number written on the bell was 469, for example, you would know that one of our Portuguese guests required assistance. Are you paying attention? The bell marked 674 indicates our associates in the lumber industry, as the number 674 means lumber processing or wood products in the Dewey Decimal System. We can’t make enemies out of important guests! The number 371 indicates educational guests. Please be nice to them, too, although they’re much less important. Respond to all of our guests whenever you hear that ring!”

“But what does that unmarked bell refer to?” Klaus asked. “The Dewey Decimal System doesn’t go higher than 999.”

The manager frowned, as if the middle Baudelaire had given him the wrong answer. “That’s the rooftop sunbathing salon,” he said. “People who sunbathe aren’t usually interested in library science, so they’re not picky about the salon’s location. Now, get moving!”

“But where shall we go first?” Violet said. “Guests have requested assistance in three places at once.”

“You’ll have to split up, of course,” Frank or Ernest replied, as unfathomably as ever. “Each concierge will choose a guest and hurry to their location. Take the elevators—they’re at 118, for force and energy.”

“Excuse me, sir,” said another bellboy, tapping Ernest or Frank on the shoulder. “There’s a banker on the phone who wants to speak to one of the managers right away.”

“I’d better get to work,” the manager said, “and so should you, concierges. Off with you!”

"Off with you" is a phrase used by people who lack the courtesy to say something more polite, such as "If there's nothing else you require, I must be going," or "I'm sorry, but I'm going to have to ask you to leave, please," or even "Excuse me, but I believe you have mistaken my home for your own, and my valuable belongings for yours, and I must ask you to return the items in question to me, and leave my home, after untying me from this chair, as I am unable to do it myself, if it's not too much trouble." The children were not pleased to be dismissed so rudely, nor were they pleased to learn that their employment as concierges would involve such a complicated organizational method in an immense and confusing hotel. They were not pleased that they had not been able to discern which manager was Frank and which was Ernest, and they were not pleased to learn that *The Daily Punctilio* was alerting the city's citizens to the Baudelaires' arrival, and that someone might recognize them at any moment and have them arrested for crimes they had not committed. But most of all, the Baudelaires were not pleased by the notion of splitting up and doing separate errands in this perplexing hotel. They had hoped to perform their duties as concierges and flaneurs together, and with each step toward the elevators they grew more and more unhappy at the idea of leaving one another behind.

"I'll go to the rooftop sunbathing salon," Violet said, trying to be brave. "Klaus, why don't you take Room 674, and Sunny, you can take Room 371. We'll all meet up at the concierge desk when we're done."

"We'll be able to observe more this way," Klaus said hopefully. "With the three of us on three separate stories, we can find the impostor much more quickly."

"Unsafe," Sunny said, which meant something along the lines of, "I'd rather not find the impostor if I'm all by myself."

"You'll be safe, Sunny," Klaus said. "This hotel is just like a large library."

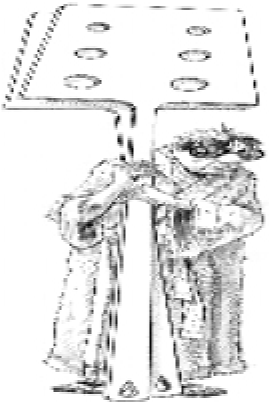
"Yes," Violet said. "And what's the worst thing that can happen in a library?"

The two younger Baudelaires did not answer her, and the three concierges stood in silence for a few moments, gazing at a small sign posted near the elevators' sliding doors. When one pair of doors finally opened, the children stepped inside and pressed the appropriate buttons for their guests' locations, and as the small elevator began to rise, the children remembered the elevator shaft at 667 Dark Avenue, which it had been necessary to climb up and down several times. The Baudelaires had learned the worst thing that could happen in an elevator shaft, which was being thrown down one by a villainous girlfriend. The Baudelaires had learned the worst thing that could happen at a lumbermill, which was being forced to cause a violent accident through the sinister power of hypnotism. And the Baudelaires had learned the worst thing that could happen at a school, which was meeting some dear friends, only to have them dragged away in a long, black automobile. The orphans learned what the worst thing was at a herpetologist's house, and what the worst thing was in a small town, and at a hospital, and at a carnival, and at the peak of a mountaintop, and in a submarine, and a cave, and within the currents of a rushing stream, and inside the trunk of a car and in a pit full of lions and in a secret passageway and many, many other sinister places they preferred not to think about at all, and throughout all these perils they had encountered, and the countless other perils besides, they had always found a library of some sort or another, where the children managed to discover the crucial information necessary to save their skins, a phrase which here means "keep them alive for the next terrible chapter in their lives." But now the Baudelaires' new home was a library—a strange one, of course, but a library nonetheless—and as the elevator took them silently through the library toward their separate destinations, they did not like to wonder what the worst thing was that could happen at a library, particularly after reading the first four words on the small, posted sign. IN CASE OF FIRE, the sign read, and as the Baudelaire orphans went their separate ways, they did not like to think of that at all.

NOT A CHAPTER

As I’m sure you’ve noticed, most of the history of the Baudelaire orphans is organized sequentially, a word which here means “so that the events in the lives of Violet, Klaus, and Sunny Baudelaire are related in the order in which they occurred.” In the case of the next three chapters, however, the story is organized simultaneously, which means that you do not have to read the chapters in the order in which they appear. In chapter four, you may find the story of Violet Baudelaire’s journey up to the rooftop sunbathing salon, and the unpleasant conversation she had occasion to overhear. In chapter five, you may read about Klaus’s experience with certain members of the lumber industry, and a sinister plot that was devised right in front of his nose. And in chapter six, you may see the result of my research into Sunny’s dreadful visit to Room 371 and to a mysterious restaurant located on the ninth story. But because all of them occur at the very same time, you need not read the chapters in the sequence four-five-six, but can read them in any order you choose. Or, more sensibly, you could simply skip all three chapters, along with the seven chapters that follow them, and find some other sequential or simultaneous thing with which to occupy your time.

CHAPTER
Four



When the elevator finally reached the roof, and the doors slid open to allow her to exit, Violet Baudelaire had two reasons to be grateful that her concierge disguise included sunglasses. For one thing, the rooftop sunbathing salon was very, very bright. The morning fog, so thick when the Baudelaires arrived on Briny Beach, had disappeared, and the rays of the afternoon sun beat down on the entire city, reflecting off every shiny object, from the glistening waters of the sea, which splashed against the opposite side of the hotel, to the surface of the pond, which had settled since Violet had thrown the stone. All along the edge of the roof were large, rectangular mirrors, tilted like the hotel itself, catching the blinding light of the afternoon sun and bouncing it onto the skin of the sunbathing guests. Ten sunbathers, their bare skin coated in thick, sticky lotion, lay without moving on shiny mats arranged around a heated swimming pool, which was so warm that clouds of steam were floating up from the surface. In a corner was an attendant, his eyes covered in green sunglasses and his body covered in a long, baggy robe. He was holding two enormous spatulas, such as might be used to flip pancakes, and from time to time he would reach out with a spatula and flip over one of the sunbathers, so that their bellies and backs would be the same shade of brown. The spatulas, like the mirrors and the mats and the pool, reflected the light of the sun, and Violet was glad her eyes were shielded.

But there was another reason the eldest Baudelaire was grateful for the sunglasses, and it had to do with the person who was waiting impatiently by the doors to the elevator. This person was also wearing sunglasses, although these were much more unusual. Instead of lenses, there were two large cones sticking out from the eyes, getting wider and wider until they stopped, as wide as dinner plates, several feet in front of the person's face. Such a pair of glasses might have concealed the identity of the person who was wearing them, but they were so ridiculous that Violet knew there could be only one person so obsessed with being fashionable that she would wear such ridiculous eyewear, and Violet was grateful that her own identity was concealed.

"Here you are at last," said Esmé Squalor. "I thought I'd never see you here."

"Pardon me?" Violet asked nervously.

"Are you deaf, concierge?" Esmé demanded. Her scornful frown was lined with silver lipstick, as if she had been drinking molten metal, and she pointed an accusing finger with a long, silver nail. The nails had been filed into individual shapes, so that each hand spelled "E-S-M-É," with the thumbnail carved into the familiar symbol of an eye. The letters were painted to match Esmé's sandals, which had long, frilly straps that ran around and around the notorious girlfriend's bare legs like centipedes. The rest of Esmé's outfit, I regret to say, consisted of three large leaves of lettuce, attached to her body with tape. If you have ever seen the bathing garment known as the bikini, then you can guess where these pieces of lettuce were attached, and if you cannot guess then I advise you to ask someone of your acquaintance who is not as squeamish as I am about discussing the bodies of villainous women. "Glamorous people like myself don't have time to be nice to the deaf," she snarled. "I rang the concierge bell more than two minutes ago, and I've been waiting the entire time!"

"I can see the headline now," crowed another voice. "'UNBELIEVABLY GLAMOROUS AND BEAUTIFUL WOMAN COMPLAINS ABOUT HOTEL SERVICE!' Wait until the readers of *The Daily Punctilio* see that!"

Violet was so relieved not to be recognized that she hadn’t noticed who was standing next to Count Olaf’s treacherous girlfriend. Geraldine Julienne was the irresponsible journalist who had printed so many lies about the Baudelaires, and she wasn’t happy to see that the reporter had become one of Esmé’s sycophants, a word which here means “people who enjoy flattering people who enjoy being flattered.”

“I’m sorry, ma’am,” Violet said, in as professional a tone as she could muster. “The concierges are particularly busy today. What is it you require?”

“It’s not what *I* require,” Esmé said, “it’s what the adorable little girl in the pool requires.”

“I’m not an adorable little girl!” Yet another familiar voice came from the direction of the heated pool, and Violet turned to see Carmelita Spats, a spoiled and unpleasant child the Baudelaires had first encountered at boarding school, who had gone on to join Count Olaf and Esmé Squalor in performing treacherous deeds. “I’m a ballplaying cowboy superhero soldier pirate!” she cried, emerging from a cloud of steam. She was wearing an outfit as ridiculous as Esmé’s, though thankfully it wasn’t as revealing. She had on a bright blue jacket, covered with shiny medals such as are given to people for military service, which was unbuttoned to reveal a white shirt that proclaimed the name of a sports team in curly blue letters. Stapled to the back of her jacket was a long, blue cape, and on her feet were a pair of bright blue boots with spurs, which are tiny wheels of spikes used to urge animals to move more quickly than they might otherwise prefer. She had a blue patch covering one of her eyes, and on her head was a blue triangular hat with a skull and crossbones printed on it—the symbol that pirates use while prowling the high seas. Carmelita Spats, of course, was not on the high seas, but had managed to drag a large, wooden boat to the rooftop sunbathing salon so she could prowl a high swimming pool. On the bow of the boat was an ornately carved figurehead, a word which here means “wooden statue of an octopus attacking a man in a diving suit,” and there was a tall mast, stretching up toward the sky, which held a billowing sail that had the insignia of an eye matching the one on Count Olaf’s ankle. The eldest Baudelaire stared for a moment at this hideous figurehead, but then turned her attention to Carmelita. The last time Violet had seen the unpleasant captain of this boat, she was dressed all in pink, and was announcing herself as a tap-dancing ballerina fairy princess veterinarian, but the eldest Baudelaire could hardly say whether being a ballplaying cowboy superhero soldier pirate was better or worse.

"Of course you are, darling," purred Esmé, and turned to Geraldine Julienne with a smile one mother might give another at a playground. "Carmelita has been a tomboy lately," she said, using an insulting term inflicted on girls whose behavior some people find unusual.

"I'm sure your daughter will grow out of it," Geraldine replied, who as usual was speaking into a microphone.

"Carmelita Spats is not my daughter," Esmé said haughtily. "I'd no sooner have children of my own than I would wear modest clothing."

"I thought you adopted three orphans," Geraldine said.

"When it was in," Esmé hurriedly added, using her usual word for "fashionable." "But orphans are out now."

"Then what's in?" asked Geraldine breathlessly.

"Planning cocktail parties in hotels, of course!" crowed Esmé. "Why else would I let a ridiculous woman like yourself interview me?"

"How wonderful!" cried Geraldine, who appeared not to realize she had just been insulted. "I can see the headline now: 'ESMÉ SQUALOR, THE MOST GLAMOROUS PERSON EVER!' Wait until the readers of *The Daily Punctilio* see that! When they read about your career as an actress, financial advisor, girlfriend, and cocktail party hostess, they'll get so excited that some of them will probably have heart attacks!"

"I hope so," Esmé said.

"I'm sure my readers will want to know all about your stylish outfit," Geraldine said, holding her microphone under Esmé's chin. "Will you tell us something about those unusual glasses you’re wearing?”

“They’re sunoculars,” Esmé said, patting her strange eyewear. “They’re a combination of sunglasses and binoculars. They’re very in, and this way I can watch the skies without getting the sun in my eyes—or the moon, if something should happen to arrive at night.”

“Why would you want to watch the skies?” Geraldine asked curiously.

Esmé frowned, and Violet could tell that the stylish woman had let something slip, a phrase which here means “said something she wished she hadn’t.” “Because birdwatching is very in,” she said unconvincingly, a word which here means “clearly telling a lie.”

“Wait until the readers of *The Daily Punctilio* hear that!” gasped Geraldine. “Will all the guests at your cocktail party be wearing sunoculars?”

“No matter what the guests are wearing,” Esmé said with a smirk, “they won’t be able to see the surprises we have in store for them.”

“What surprises?” Geraldine asked eagerly.

“If I told you what they were,” Esmé said, “they wouldn’t be surprises.”

“Couldn’t you give me a hint?” Geraldine asked.

“No,” Esmé said.

“Not even a little one?” Geraldine asked.

“No,” Esmé said.

“Pretty please?” Geraldine whined. “Pretty please with sugar on top?”

Esmé’s silver-coated lips curled thoughtfully. “If I give you a hint,” she said, “you’ll have to tell me something, too. You’re a reporter, so you know all sorts of interesting information. Before I reveal my special hors d’oeuvres for Thursday’s cocktail party, I want you to tell me something about a certain guest at this hotel. He’s been lurking around the basement, plotting to spoil our party. His initials are J. S.”

“Lurking around the basement?” Geraldine repeated. “But J. S. is—”

“Esmé!” Carmelita screamed from the swimming pool, interrupting at just the worst moment. “That concierge is just standing there, when she’s supposed to be at my beck and call! She’s nothing but a cakesniffer!”

Esmé turned to Violet, who was used to being called a cakesniffer after all this time. “What are you waiting for?” she snarled. “Go get whatever that darling little girl wants!”

Esmé twirled around and marched away, and Violet was glad to see that the villainous girlfriend’s outfit had two more lettuce leaves than had been visible from the front. The eldest Baudelaire was sorry to stop performing her flaneur errands and begin her duties as a concierge, but she stepped to the edge of the swimming pool, walking carefully on the tilted roof of the hotel and peering into the clouds of steam. “What is it you want, miss?” she asked, hoping Carmelita would not recognize her voice.

“A harpoon gun, of course!” Carmelita said. “Countie said that I can’t be a ballplaying cowboy superhero soldier pirate without a harpoon gun.”

“Who’s Countie?” Geraldine asked.

“Esmé’s boyfriend,” Carmelita said. “He thinks I’m the most darling, special little girl in the entire world. He said if I used my harpoon gun properly he would teach me how to spit like a real ballplaying cowboy superhero soldier pirate!”

“I can see the headline now,” Geraldine said into her microphone. “‘BALLPLAYING COWBOY SUPERHERO SOLDIER PIRATE LEARNS TO SPIT!’ Wait until the readers of *The Daily Punctilio* see that!”

“I’ll fetch you a harpoon gun, miss.” Violet promised, ducking to avoid the attendant’s spatula, which was overturning a sunbathing woman.

"Stop calling me 'miss,' you cakesniffer!" Carmelita said. "I'm a ballplaying cowboy superhero soldier pirate!"

Fetching objects for people who are too lazy to fetch them for themselves is never a pleasant task, particularly when the people are insulting you, but as Violet walked back to the elevator and pressed the button for it to arrive, she was not thinking about Carmelita's atrocious behavior. She was too preoccupied, a word which here means "wondering what exactly Esmé Squalor and Carmelita Spats were doing at the Hotel Denouement." The two unsavory females knew full well about V.F.D. and the plans for Thursday's gathering, but the eldest Baudelaire did not believe for a minute that all they were planning was a cocktail party. As the doors slid open and Violet stepped inside, she wondered why Esmé was using her sunoculars to search the skies. She wondered what Carmelita wanted with a harpoon gun. She wondered how Esmé knew about the impostor J. S., who was apparently lurking around the basement of the hotel. But most of all, she wondered where Count Olaf—or, as Carmelita liked to call him, "Countie"—was hiding, and what treachery he was planning.

Violet was thinking so hard about her observations as a flaneur that it was only when the elevator doors shut that she remembered her errand as a concierge, and realized that she had no idea where to find a harpoon gun. Harpoon guns are not part of the usual equipment provided by a hotel, and the only time Violet had seen such a device was in Esmé Squalor's own hands, back when she was disguised as a policewoman at the Village of Fowl Devotees. Even if the Hotel Denouement had thought to keep such a thing in the building, Violet could not imagine where she might find it in the Dewey Decimal System without a catalog. She wished Klaus were with her, as the only number of the Dewey Decimal System she knew by heart was 621, which labeled her favorite section, applied physics. With a glum sigh, the eldest Baudelaire pressed the button for the lobby.

"You're asking me for help?" cried either Frank or Ernest, when Violet managed to find him. The lobby of the Hotel Denouement was even more crowded than when the Baudelaires had arrived, and it took Violet a few minutes before she could find the familiar figure of the volunteer or his villainous brother. "I'm the one who needs help," he said. "An astonishing number of guests have arrived earlier than expected. I have no time to be a concierge helper."

"I realize that you're busy, sir," Violet said. She knew that calling a person "sir" can often help you get what you want, unless of course the person is a woman. "A guest has requested a harpoon gun, and I don't know where to find one. I wish the Hotel Denouement had a catalog."

"You shouldn't need a catalog," the manager said. "Not if you're who I think you are."

Violet gasped, and either Frank or Ernest took one step closer to her. "Are you?" he asked. "Are you who I think you are?"

Violet blinked behind her sunglasses. There are people in this world who say that silence is golden, which simply means that they prefer a calm and peaceful hush to the noise and clutter of the world. There is nothing wrong with such a preference, but sadly there are times when a calm and peaceful hush is simply not possible. If you are watching the sun set, for instance, silence may permit you to be alone with your thoughts as you gaze at the darkening landscape, but it may be necessary to make a loud noise to scare off any grizzly bears that may be approaching. If you are riding in a taxi, you might prefer silence so you can study your map in peace, but the occasion may require you to shout, "Please turn around! I think they've driven through those hedges!" And if you have lost a loved one, as the Baudelaires did on the fateful day of a fire, you may wish very dearly for a long period of silence, so you and your siblings can contemplate your puzzling and woeful situation, but you may find yourself tossed from one dangerous situation to another, and another, and another, so that you begin to think you will never find yourself in a calm and peaceful hush. As Violet stood in the lobby, she wanted nothing more than to be silent, so that she might further observe the man standing next to her, and discover if he was a volunteer, to whom she could say, "Yes, I'm Violet Baudelaire," or a villain, to whom she could say, "I'm sorry; I don't know what you're talking about." But she knew that she could not not hope for a calm and peaceful hush in the chaos of Hotel Denouement, and so rather than remain silent she answered the manager's question as best she could.

"Of course I'm who you think I am," she said, feeling as if she were talking in code, although in a code she did not know. "I'm a concierge."

"I see," said Frank or Ernest unfathomably. "And who is requesting the harpoon gun?"

"A young girl on the roof," Violet said.

"A young girl on the roof," the manager repeated with a sly smile. "Are you sure a harpoon gun should be given to a young girl on the roof?"

Violet did not know how to answer him, but fortunately this appeared to be one of the times when silence is in fact golden, because at her silence, Frank or Ernest gave the eldest Baudelaire another smile and then turned on his heel—a phrase which here means "turned around in a somewhat fancy manner"—and beckoned Violet to follow him to a far corner of the lobby, where she saw a small door marked 121. "This number stands for epistemology," he explained, using a word which here means "theories of knowledge" and looking hurriedly around the lobby as if he were being watched. "I thought it would be a good hiding place."

Frank or Ernest took a key out of his pocket and unlocked the door, which swung open with a quiet creak to reveal a small, bare closet. The only thing in the closet was a large, wicked-looking object, with a bright red trigger and four long, sharp hooks. The eldest Baudelaire recognized it from her stay in the Village of Fowl Devotees. She knew it was a harpoon gun, a deadly device that ought not to be in the hands of anyone, let alone Carmelita Spats. Violet did not want to touch it herself, but as the manager stood at the door gazing at her, she could think of no other choice, and carefully removed the device from the closet.

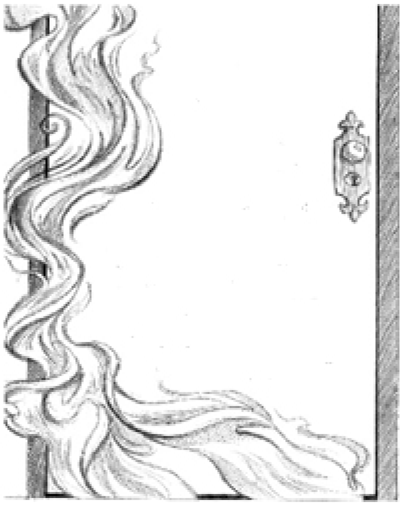
"Be very careful with this," the manager said in an unfathomable tone. "A weapon like this should only be in the hands of the right person. I'm grateful for your assistance, concierge. Not many people have the courage to help with a scheme like this."

Violet nodded silently, and silently took the heavy weapon from Frank or Ernest's hands. In silence she walked back to the elevators, her head spinning with her mysterious observations as a flaneur and her mysterious errand as a concierge, and in silence she stood at the sliding elevator doors, wondering which manager she had spoken to, and what precisely she had said to him in her coded, quiet response. But just before the elevator arrived, Violet's silence was shattered by an enormous noise.

The clock in the lobby of the Hotel Denouement is the stuff of legend, a phrase which here means "very famous for being very loud." It is located in the very center of the ceiling, at the very top of the dome, and when the clock announces the hour, its bells clang throughout the entire building, making an immense, deep noise that sounds like a certain word being uttered once for each hour. At this particular moment, it was three o'clock, and everyone in the hotel could hear the booming ring of the enormous bells of the clock, uttering the word three times in succession: *Wrong! Wrong! Wrong!*

As she boarded the elevator, the harpoon gun heavy and sinister in her gloved hands, Violet Baudelaire felt as if the clock were scolding her for her efforts at solving the mysteries of the Hotel Denouement. *Wrong!* She had tried her best to be a flaneur, but hadn't observed enough to decode the scheme of Esmé Squalor and Carmelita Spats. *Wrong!* She had tried to communicate with one of the hotel's managers, but had been unable to discover whether he was Frank or Ernest. And—most *Wrong!* of all—she was now taking a deadly weapon to the rooftop sunbathing salon, where it would serve some unknown, sinister purpose. With each strike of the clock, Violet felt wronger and wronger, until at last she reached her destination, and stepped out of the elevator. She dearly hoped her two siblings had found more success in their errands, for as she walked across the roof, avoiding a spatula as it flipped the guests on their mirrored mats, until at last she could hoist the harpoon gun into Carmelita's eager and ungrateful hands, all the eldest Baudelaire could think was that everything was wrong, wrong, wrong.

CHAPTER
Five



When the elevator reached the sixth story, Klaus bade good-bye to Violet and stepped out into a long, empty hallway. The hallway was lined with numbered doors, odd numbers on one side and even numbers on the other, and large ornamental vases, too large to hold flowers and too small to hold spies. On the floor was a smooth, gray carpet that muffled each of the middle Baudelaire's uncertain steps. Although Klaus had never set foot in the Hotel Denouement before today, walking down the hallway gave him a familiar feeling. It was the feeling he had whenever he entered a library with an important problem to solve, suspecting that somewhere within the library's collection of books was the perfect answer to whatever question was foremost on his mind. He had this feeling when he and his siblings were living just off Lousy Lane, and he solved the murder of Uncle Monty with crucial information he discovered in a herpetological library. He had this feeling when he and his siblings were deep in the ocean, and he managed to dilute the poison infecting Sunny by finding a significant fact in a mycological library belonging to Fiona, a young woman who had broken Klaus's heart. And as he stood in the hallway, gazing at all of the numbered doors that stretched out as far as his eyes could see, Klaus Baudelaire had the feeling again. Hidden somewhere in this hotel, he was sure, was something or someone that could answer all the Baudelaires’ questions, solve all of the Baudelaires’ mysteries, and put an end at last to all the Baudelaires’ woes. It was as if he could hear this answer calling to him, like a baby crying at the bottom of a damp well, or an alarm clock ringing underneath a heap of damp blankets.

Without a catalog, however, Klaus had no idea where such a solution might be, so he made his way toward his concierge errand in Room 674, hoping that whatever he would observe as a flaneur might bring him closer to unraveling the Baudelaires’ list of misfortunes. When he stopped in front of the numbered door, however, it appeared that he was only adding another misfortune to this woeful list. Smoke was pouring out of the gap between the door and the floor, spreading out across the hallway like a sinister stain.

“Hello?” Klaus called, knocking on the door.

“Hello yourself,” called back a voice that sounded slightly familiar and utterly unconcerned. “Are you one of those concertinas?”

“I’m a concierge,” Klaus said, not bothering to explain that a concertina is a kind of accordion. “Can I be of assistance?”

“Of course you can be of assistance!” the voice called back. “That’s why I rang for you! Enter at once!”

Klaus, of course, did not want to enter a room that was filled with smoke, but working, even for the purposes of secretly observing the mysteries of a hotel, usually means doing things you do not want to do, so the middle Baudelaire opened the door, releasing an enormous amount of smoke into the hallway, and took a few hesitant steps into the room. Through the smoke he could see a short figure, dressed in a suit of shiny green cloth, standing at the far end of the room, facing the window. Behind his back he held a cigar that was clearly responsible for all the smoke wafting past Klaus into the hallway. But Klaus did not care about the smoke. He hardly even noticed it. He merely stared in dismay at the person standing at the window, a person he had hoped he would never see again.

You have probably heard the tiresome expression “It’s a small world,” which people use to explain a coincidence. For instance, if you walk into an Italian restaurant and encounter a waiter you recognize, the waiter might cry, “It’s a small world!” as if it were unavoidable that the two of you would be at the same restaurant at the same time. But if you’ve ever taken even the shortest of walks, you know the truth of the matter. It is not a small world. It is a large world, and there are Italian restaurants sprinkled all over it, employing waiters who have crucial messages for you and waiters who are trying to make sure you never receive them, and these pairs of waiters are engaged in an argument that began many years ago, when you were so young that it was not safe to feed you even the softest of gnocchi. The world is not small but enormous, and Klaus had hoped that this enormous world was big enough that a guest of the Hotel Denouement employed in the lumber industry and staying in Room 674 would not be the horrid man who had employed him and his sisters at Lucky Smells Lumbermill. During their dreadful stay in Paltryville, the Baudelaires never saw the man’s face, which was always covered by a cloud of smoke from his cigar, and they never learned the man’s real name, which was so difficult to pronounce that he made everyone call him “Sir,” but they learned plenty about his greedy and cruel behavior, and Klaus was not happy to learn that this enormous world was going to treat him to another helping of Sir’s selfishness.

“Well, don’t just stand there!” Sir shouted. “Ask what you can do for me!”

“What can I do for you, Sir?” Klaus asked.

Sir whirled around, and the cloud around his head whirled around, too. “How did you know my name?” he asked suspiciously.

“The concierge didn’t know your name,” said another voice patiently, and Klaus saw, through the smoke, a second person he had not noticed, sitting on the bed in a bathrobe with HOTEL DENOUEMENT embroidered on the back. This man was also familiar from the Baudelaires’ days at Lucky Smells, although Klaus did not know whether to be happy to see him or not. On one hand, Charles had always been kind to the children, and although his kindness had not been enough to save them from danger, it is always a relief to discover there is a kind person in the room that you had not noticed previously. On the other hand, however, Klaus was sorry to see that Charles was still partners with Sir, who enjoyed bossing around Charles almost as much as he did the Baudelaires. “I’m sure the concierge calls all the male guests in this hotel ‘sir.’”

“Of course he does!” Sir shouted. “I’m not an idiot! Now then, concertina, we want to be taken to the sauna right away!”

“Yes sir,” Klaus said, grateful that either Frank or Ernest had mentioned that the sauna was in Room 613. A sauna is a room constructed out of wood and kept very, very hot, in which people can sit in steam, which is believed to be beneficial to one’s health, and Klaus would have found it very difficult to find such a room in the Hotel Denouement without a catalog. “The sauna should be down the hall, on the opposite side,” Klaus said. “If you gentlemen will follow me, I’ll take you there.”

“I’m sorry we made you come all the way to our rooms just to take us right down the hall,” Charles said.

“It’s my pleasure,” Klaus said. As I’m sure you know, when people say, “It’s my pleasure,” they usually mean something along the lines of, “There’s nothing on Earth I would rather do less,” but the middle Baudelaire was hoping that he could learn why the Baudelaires’ former guardian and his partner had journeyed from Paltryville to the Hotel Denouement.

“Let’s go this very instant!” Sir shouted, marching out into the hallway.

“Don’t you want to change into a bathing suit?” Charles asked. “If you’re fully clothed, you won’t get the health benefits of the steam.”

“I don’t care about the health benefits of the steam!” Sir shouted. “I’m not an idiot! I just love the smell of hot wood!”

Charles sighed, and followed Klaus out of Room 674 and into the hallway. “I was hoping my partner would relax during our stay here,” he said, “but I’m afraid he’s taking a busman’s holiday.”

"Busman's holiday" is an expression which refers to when people do the same thing on vacation that they do in their everyday lives, such as plumbers who visit the Museum of Sinks, or villains who disguise themselves even on their days off. But Klaus could not believe that these two men were merely vacationing in the Hotel Denouement, just two days before V.F.D. was to gather. "Are you here on business?" he asked, hoping that Charles would keep talking as they approached the sauna.

"Don't tell that concertina anything!" Sir cried, continuing to use the word for "accordion" instead of the word for "hotel employee." "He's supposed to be at our beck and call, not nosing around in our business like a spy!"

"Forgive me, Sir," Klaus said, as calmly as he could. "We've arrived at the sauna."

Sure enough, Klaus, Sir, and Charles had arrived at Room 613, which had a mass of steam pouring out of the gap between the door and the floor, like a mirror image of Sir's cigar smoke pouring out of Room 674. "You can wait outside, concertina," said Sir. "We'll shout for you when we're ready to be escorted back to our room."

"We don't need to be escorted," Charles said timidly, opening the door. Inside, Klaus could see nothing but a mass of whirling steam. "It's just down the hallway. I'm sure the concierge has enough to do without waiting around for us."

"But someone has to hold my cigar!" Sir shouted. "I can't walk into a room full of steam with a head full of smoke! I'm not an idiot!"

"Of course not," Charles said with a sigh, and walked into the sauna. Sir handed Klaus the cigar and strode into the sauna before the cloud of smoke around his head could clear. Behind him, the door started to close, but Klaus thought quickly and stuck out his foot. The door remained open just a crack, and as quietly as he could he swung the door back open and slipped inside, pausing to balance Sir's cigar on the rim of one of the ornamental vases. As he suspected, the steam was so thick inside the sauna that he could not see Sir or his partner, which meant the Paltryville citizens could not see him, either, while they sat and talked in the heated room. It was a flaneur’s perfect opportunity to eavesdrop on a private conversation.

“I wish you could be more polite,” Charles said, his voice drifting through the steam. “There was no reason to accuse that concierge of being a spy.”

“I was just trying to be cautious!” Sir said gruffly, a word which here means “in a tone that indicated he had no intention of being more polite.” Klaus heard the crinkle of his shiny suit, and imagined that the lumbermill owner was shrugging. “You’re the one who said enemies might be lurking in this hotel!”

“That’s what I was told in the letter I received,” Charles said. “According to J. S., we must be very cautious if we want to find the Baudelaires.”

Klaus was grateful that his amazed expression was hidden in the steam. The middle Baudelaire could not imagine why the mysterious impostor J. S. was helping Charles find him and his sisters, and if it had not been so hot in the sauna he would have broken out in a cold sweat, a phrase which here means “felt very nervous about the conversation he was observing.”

“I don’t want to find the Baudelaires!” Sir said. “Those orphans were nothing but trouble for the lumbermill!”

“They weren’t the cause of the trouble,” Charles said. “Count Olaf was. Don’t you remember?”

“Of course I remember!” Sir cried. “I’m not an idiot! Count Olaf disguised himself as a rather attractive young lady, and worked with that sinister hypnotist to cause accidents in my mill! If the Baudelaires didn’t have that fortune waiting for them in the bank, Olaf never would have done all that mischief! It’s the orphans’ fault!”

“I suppose you’re right,” Charles said, “but I still would like to find them. According to *The Daily Punctilio,* the Baudelaires are in a heap of trouble.”

“According to *The Daily Punctilio,*” Sir said, “the Baudelaires are murderers! For all we know, that bookworm with the eyeglasses could sneak up on us right here in the hotel and kill us to death!”

“The children aren’t going to murder us,” Charles said, “although after their experiences at Lucky Smells I could hardly blame them. In fact, if I manage to find them, the first thing I’ll do is give them my sincere apologies. Perhaps I can ask one of the concierges for a pair of binoculars. J. S. said they might be arriving by submarine, so I could watch for a periscope rising from the sea.”

“I wish our room had a view of the pond instead,” Sir said. “When I’m done with a cigar, I like to drop the butt into a calm body of water and watch the pretty ripples.”

“I’m not sure that would be good for the pond,” Charles said.

“What do I care about the pond?” Sir demanded. “I have better things to do than worry about the environment. The Finite Forest is running low on trees, so business is bad for the lumbermill. The last big order we had was for building that horseradish factory, and that was a very long time ago. I’m hoping Thursday’s cocktail party will be an excellent opportunity to do some business. After all, if it weren’t for my lumber, this hotel wouldn’t even exist!”

“I remember,” Charles said. “We had to deliver the lumber in the middle of the night. But Sir, you told me you never heard from that organization again.”

“I didn’t,” Sir said, “until now. You’re not the only one who gets notes from this fellow J. S. I’m invited to a party he’s hosting on Thursday night, and he said I should bring all my valuables. That must mean plenty of rich people will be there—rich people who might want to buy some lumber.”

“Perhaps if the lumbermill becomes more successful,” Charles said, “we could pay our employees with money, instead of just gum and coupons.”

“Don’t be an idiot!” Sir said. “Gum and coupons is a fair deal! If you spent less time reading and more time thinking about lumber, you’d care more about money and less about people!”

“There’s nothing wrong with caring about people,” Charles said quietly. “I care about you, Sir. And I care about the Baudelaires. If what J. S. wrote is true, then their parents—”

“Excuse me.” The door of the sauna swung open, and Klaus saw a tall, dim figure step into the steam.

“Is that my concertina?” Sir barked. “I told you to wait outside!”

“No, I’m one of the managers of the hotel,” said either Frank or Ernest. “We do have a concertina available in Room 786, if you’re interested in musical instruments. I’m sorry to interrupt your afternoon, but I’m afraid I must ask all guests to vacate the sauna. A situation has arisen that requires the use of this room. If you are interested in steam, there’s quite a bit of it in Room—”

“I don’t care about steam!” cried Sir. “I just like smelling hot wood! Where else can I smell hot wood, except in the sauna?”

“Room 547 is dedicated to organic chemistry,” replied the manager. “There are all sorts of smelly things there.”

Klaus quickly opened the sauna door and pretended to walk inside. “I’d be happy to take our guests to Room 547,” he said, hoping to observe the rest of Sir and Charles’s conversation.

“No, no,” the manager said. “You’re needed here, concierge. By a strange coincidence there happens to be a chemist standing in the hallway who would be happy to escort these two gentlemen.”

“Oh, all right!” Sir said, and stomped out of the sauna, where a figure stood in a long, white coat and a mask such as surgeons or chemists wear over their noses and mouths. Sir reached down and picked up his cigar from the ornamental vase, restoring the cloud of smoke to his face just as the cloud of steam evaporated, and without another word he and his partner followed the chemist away from the sauna, leaving Klaus alone with the volunteer or villain.

“Be very careful with this,” said either Frank or Ernest, handing a large, rigid object to Klaus. It was something flat and wide, rolled into a thick tube like a sleeping bag. “When it’s unrolled, the surface is very sticky—so sticky that anything it touches becomes trapped. Do you know what this is called?”

“Flypaper,” Klaus said, remembering a book he had read about the adventures of an exterminator. “Is the hotel having an insect problem?”

“Our problem is not with insects,” the manager said. “It’s with birds. This is birdpaper. I need you to attach one end to the windowsill of this room, and dangle the rest outside, over the pond. Can you guess why?”

“To trap birds,” Klaus said.

“You’re obviously very well-read,” said Ernest or Frank, although it was impossible to tell whether he was impressed or disgusted with this fact. “So you know that birds can cause all sorts of problems. For instance, I’ve heard about a swarm of eagles that recently stole a great crowd of children. What do you think of that?”

Klaus gasped. He knew, of course, exactly what he thought of the great swarm of eagles who kidnapped a troop of Snow Scouts while the Baudelaires were living on Mount Fraught. He thought it was horrid, but the face on the volunteer or villain was so unfathomable that the middle Baudelaire could not tell if the manager thought so, too. “I think it’s remarkable,” Klaus said finally, carefully choosing a word which here means either wonderful or horrible.

“That’s a remarkable answer,” replied either Frank or Ernest, and then Klaus heard the manager sigh thoughtfully. “Tell me,” he said, “are you who I think you are?”

Klaus blinked behind his glasses, and behind the sunglasses that lay on top of them. Deciding on a safe answer to a question is like deciding on a safe ingredient in a sandwich, because if you make the wrong decision you may find that something horrible is coming out of your mouth. As Klaus stood in the sauna, he wanted nothing more than to decide on a safe answer, such as “Yes, I’m Klaus Baudelaire,” if he were talking to Frank, or “I’m sorry I don’t know what you’re talking about,” if he were talking to Ernest. But he knew there was no way to tell if either of those answers was safe, so he opened his mouth and uttered the only other answer he could think of.

“Of course I’m who you think I am,” he said, feeling as if he were talking in code, although in a code he did not know. “I’m a concierge.”

“I see,” said Frank or Ernest, as unfathomable as ever. “I’m grateful for your assistance, concierge. Not many people have the courage to help with a scheme like this.”

Without another word, the manager left, and Klaus was alone in the sauna. Carefully, he walked through the steam and felt his way to the window, which he managed to unlatch and open, swinging a shutter marked ∂ out over the pond. As will happen when a very hot room is exposed to cold air, the steam raced through the window and evaporated. With the steam gone, Klaus could see the wooden walls and benches that comprised the sauna, and he only wished that everything were as clear in his own head as it was in Room 613. In silence, he attached one end of the birdpaper to the windowsill, his head spinning with his mysterious observations as a flaneur and his mysterious errand as a concierge, and in silence he dangled the rest outside, where it curved stiffly over the pond like a slide at a playground. In silence he gazed at this strange arrangement, and wondered which manager had requested such an odd task. But before he could leave the sauna, Klaus’s silence was shattered by an enormous noise.

The clock in the lobby of the Hotel Denouement is the stuff of legend, a phrase which here means “very famous for being very loud.” It is located in the very center of the ceiling, at the very top of the dome, and when the clock announces the hour, its bells clang throughout the entire building, making an immense, deep noise that sounds like a certain word being uttered once for each hour. At this particular moment, it was three o’clock, and everyone in the hotel could hear the booming ring of the enormous bells of the clock, uttering the word three times in succession: *Wrong! Wrong! Wrong!*

As he turned away from the sauna's open window and walked back down the hall toward the elevator doors, Klaus Baudelaire felt as if the clock were scolding him for his efforts at solving the mysteries of the Hotel Denouement. *Wrong!* He had tried his best to be a flaneur, but hadn't observed enough to know exactly what Sir and Charles were doing at the hotel. *Wrong!* He had tried to communicate with one of the hotel's managers, but had been unable to discover whether he was Frank or Ernest. And—most *Wrong!* of all—he had performed his errand as a concierge, and now a strip of birdpaper was dangling out of the Hotel Denouement, where it would serve some unknown, sinister purpose. With each strike of the clock, Klaus felt wronger and wronger, and as he stepped inside the small elevator, he frowned in thought. He dearly hoped his two siblings had found more success in their errands, for as he walked through the sliding doors and pressed the button to return to the lobby, all the middle Baudelaire could think was that everything was wrong, wrong, wrong.

CHAPTER
Six

When the elevator reached the third story, Sunny bid good-bye to her siblings and stepped out into a long, empty hallway. Numbered doors lined the hallway, odd numbers on one side and even numbers on the other, as well as large, ornamental vases that were taller than Sunny but not nearly as charming. The youngest Baudelaire walked on the smooth, gray carpet in nervous, uncertain steps. Pretending to be a concierge in order to be a flaneur, in the hopes of unraveling a mystery unfolding in an enormous, perplexing hotel, was a difficult enough task for her older siblings, but it was particularly difficult for someone just growing out of babyhood. Over the past few months, Sunny Baudelaire had improved her walking abilities, adopted a more standard vocabulary, and even learned how to cook, but she was still unsure whether she could successfully pass for a hotel professional. As she approached the guests who had rung for a concierge, she decided that she would adopt a taciturn demeanor, a phrase which here means “only communicate when absolutely necessary, so as not to call attention to her youth and relative inexperience in employment.”

When Sunny reached Room 371 she thought at first there had been some mistake. Down in the lobby, either Frank or Ernest had told the Baudelaires that educational guests were staying in that particular room, but the youngest Baudelaire could not imagine what educational purpose could explain the unearthly sounds coming from behind the door, unless perhaps a teacher was giving a class on how to torture a small animal. Someone—or something—in Room 371 was making dreadful squeaks, strange moans, piercing whistles, irritating shrieks, mysterious mutterings, and, suddenly, a melodic hum or two, and the sounds were so loud that it was a moment before anyone heard Sunny's gloved fists knocking on the door.

"Who dares interrupt a genius when he's rehearsing?" said a voice that was loud, booming, and strangely familiar.

"Concierge," Sunny called.

"*Concierge,*" the voice mimicked back to Sunny, in a high, squealing tone that the Baudelaire recognized instantly, and to her dismay the door opened and there stood a person she had hoped she would never encounter again.

If you have ever worked someplace and then, later, not worked there, then you know there are three ways you can leave a job: you can quit, you can be fired, or you can exit by mutual agreement. "Quit," as I'm sure you know, is a word which means that you were disappointed with your employer. "Fired," of course, is a word which means that your employer was disappointed with you. And "exit by mutual agreement" is a phrase which means that you wanted to quit, and your employer wanted to fire you, and that you ran out of the office, factory, or monastery before anyone could decide who got to go first. In any case, no matter which method you use to leave a job, it is never pleasant to run into a former employer, because it reminds both of you of all the miserable time you spent working together. I once threw myself down a flight of stairs rather than face even one moment with a milliner, at whose shop I quit working after discovering the sinister truth about her berets, only to find that the paramedic who repaired my fractured arm was a man who had fired me from a job playing accordion in his orchestra after only two and half performances of a certain opera. It would be difficult to say whether Sunny ended her brief stint—a word which here means "dreadful period of time"—working as an administrative assistant at Prufrock Preparatory School by quitting, getting fired, or exiting by mutual agreement, as she and her siblings were removed from the boarding school after a scheme of Count Olaf's almost succeeded, but it was still unpleasant to be face-to-face with Vice Principal Nero after all this time.

“What do you want?” Nero demanded, brandishing the violin that had been making all that dreadful noise. Sunny was not pleased to see that Nero’s four pigtails, which were quite short when she had first made the vice principal’s acquaintance, had grown into long, stringy braids, and that he still liked to wear a necktie decorated with pictures of snails.

“You rang,” Sunny said, as taciturnly as she could.

“*You rang,*” Nero mimicked immediately. “Well, so what if I did? Ringing for you is no excuse for interrupting me while I’m practicing the violin. I have a very important violin recital on Thursday, and I plan on rehearsing every moment until then.”

“Please, boss,” said another familiar voice, and Nero turned around, his greasy braids swinging behind him. Sunny saw, to her dismay, that Nero was sharing Room 371 with two other figures from the Baudelaires’ past. “You said we could stop for a lunch break,” continued Mr. Remora, who had been Violet’s teacher at Prufrock Preparatory School, although it would be difficult to say exactly what kind of teacher he was, as all he liked to do was tell short, pointless stories, and eat banana after banana, occasionally smearing the yellow pulp all over his mustache, which was as dark and thick as a gorilla’s thumb.

“I’m so hungry I could eat a dekagram of rice,” said Mrs. Bass, who had been Klaus’s teacher. It was clear that her enthusiasm for measuring things according to the metric system had remained the same, but the youngest Baudelaire noticed that her appearance had changed somewhat. On top of her shaggy, black hair was a small blond wig, like a snowcap on the top of a mountain peak, and she was wearing a small, narrow mask with two tiny holes for her eyes. “I’ve heard there’s a wonderful Indian restaurant in Room 954.”

Normally, Sunny would have replied with “Andiamo,” which was her way of saying, “I’d be happy to take you there,” but she was afraid that her manner of speaking would give away her true identity, so instead she continued her taciturn demeanor by giving the three guests a little bow, and gesturing down the hallway with one of her gloves. Vice Principal Nero looked disappointed, but then gave Sunny a simpering glance and mimicked her gestures in an insulting way, proving he could mock someone even if they didn't speak.

"Don't you think you should bring your loot, Mrs. Bass?" asked Mr. Remora, pointing to the far wall of Room 371.

"No, no," Mrs. Bass said quickly, her eyes blinking nervously through the holes in the mask. "It'll be safer in the room."

Sunny tilted her head so she could stare past the teacher's knees, and made her first important observation as a flaneur. Piled on a table in the hotel room, right near a window overlooking the sea, was a large, bulky pile of large, bulky bags, each with the words PROPERTY OF MULCTUARY MONEY MANAGEMENT stamped on them in stern black ink. The youngest Baudelaire could not imagine why Mrs. Bass was in possession of something from the bank where Mr. Poe worked, but with two teachers and one vice principal waiting impatiently in the hallway, she had no time to stop and think. With another taciturn gesture, she quickly led the guests toward the elevator, grateful that Mrs. Bass knew the location of the restaurant. The youngest Baudelaire would have had no idea how to find an Indian restaurant in the Hotel Denouement without a catalog.

"I'm very excited about my recital," Vice Principal Nero said, as the small elevator began its journey to the ninth story. "I'm sure all of the music critics at the cocktail party will love my performance. As soon as I'm recognized as a genius, I can finally quit my job at Prufrock Prep!"

"How do you know there will be music critics at the party?" Mr. Remora asked. "My invitation just said there'd be an all-you-can-eat banana buffet."

"Mine didn't say anything about music critics, either," Mrs. Bass said. "It just says that there's a party in celebration of the metric system, and that I should bring as many valuables as possible so they could be measured. As a teacher, I don’t earn enough money to purchase any valuables, so I had to resort to a life of crime.”

“*I had to resort to a life of crime,*” Nero mimicked. “I can’t believe a genius like myself was invited to the same party as you two. Esmé Squalor and her boyfriend must have accidentally mailed you those invitations.”

Sunny’s eyes narrowed in thought behind her enormous sunglasses. Esmé Squalor’s boyfriend, of course, was none other than Count Olaf. After so much time struggling against his villainous schemes, the youngest Baudelaire was not surprised to hear that Olaf was planning further treachery, but she could not imagine why he was luring her former employer to the hotel. She would have loved to continue her observations as a flaneur, but as the elevator came to a stop, she had to return to her duties as a concierge, and utter at least one taciturn word.

“Nine,” she said.

“*Nine,*” Nero mimicked, and pushed his way to the front so he could exit the elevator first. Sunny followed, and quickly guided the three guests to the door numbered 954, which she opened with a silent flourish.

“Can I help you?” asked a wavering voice, and Sunny was astonished to recognize yet another person from the Baudelaires’ past. He was a very old man, wearing very tiny glasses, each lens scarcely larger than a green pea. When the children had first met this man, he had not been wearing a hat of any kind, but today he had wrapped a length of cloth around his head and secured it in place with a shiny red jewel. Sunny remembered such a turban on the head of Count Olaf when he had disguised himself as a gym teacher, but she could not guess why such a thing would be worn by the man the Baudelaires had met at Heimlich Hospital.

“*Can I help you?*” Nero mimicked. “Of course you can help us! We’re starving!”

“I didn’t realize this was a sad occasion,” said Hal, squinting through his glasses.

“It won’t be a sad occasion if you feed us,” Mr. Remora said.

Hal frowned, as if Mr. Remora had given the wrong response, but he quickly ushered the three guests to a wooden table in the otherwise deserted restaurant. “We are proud to serve a wide variety of Indian dishes,” he said, handing out menus and pouring everyone a glass of water. “The culinary history of the region is quite interesting, actually. When the British—”

“I’ll have ten grams of rice,” Mrs. Bass interrupted, “one tenth of a hectogram of shrimp vindaloo, a dekagram of chana aloo masala, one thousand centigrams of tandoori salmon, four samosas with a surface area of ninteen cubic centimeters, five deciliters of mango lassi, and a sada rava dosai that’s exactly nineteen centimeters long.”

Sunny hoped Hal would talk about some of the dishes Mrs. Bass had ordered, so her observations as a flaneur might also improve her cooking skills, but he merely wrote down her order without comment and turned to Mr. Remora, who was frowning at the menu.

“I’ll have forty-eight orders of fried bananas,” he said, after much thought.

“Interesting choice,” Hal commented. “And you, sir?”

“A bag of candy!” Vice Principal Nero demanded. Sunny had almost forgotten that her former employer enjoyed demanding candy from anyone he could.

“Candy is not a traditional Indian dish,” Hal said. “If you’re not sure what to order, allow me to recommend the combination plate.”

“*Allow me to recommend the combination plate!*” Nero mimicked, glaring at Hal. “Never mind. I won’t eat anything! It’s probably dangerous to eat candy from foreigners!”

Hal did not reply to this bout of xenophobia—a word for a fear or disgust of foreign cultures that Jerome Squalor had taught the Baudelaires a while ago—but merely nodded. “Your lunches will be ready shortly,” he said. “I’ll be in the kitchen if you need anything.”

“*I’ll be in the kitchen if you need anything,*” Nero mimicked immediately, as Hal walked through a pair of swinging doors. With a sigh, he moved his water glass off his placemat and onto the wooden table, where it was sure to leave a ring, and turned to the two teachers. “That foreigner’s head reminds me of that nice man Coach Genghis.”

“Nice man?” Mr. Remora asked. “If I remember correctly, he was a notorious villain in disguise.”

Mrs. Bass reached up and nervously adjusted her wig. “Just because someone is a criminal,” she said, “does not mean they’re not a nice person. Besides, if you’re on the run from the law, you’re bound to get cranky from time to time.”

“Speaking of running from the law—” Mr. Remora said, but the vice principal cut off his sentence with a glare.

“We’ll talk about that later,” he said quickly, and then turned to Sunny. “Concierge, go get us some napkins,” he said, clearly inventing an excuse to get the youngest Baudelaire out of earshot. “Just because I’m not eating doesn’t mean I can’t get food on my chin!”

Sunny nodded taciturnly, and walked toward the swinging doors. As a flaneur, she was sorry to halt her observations, particularly when the guests of Room 371 seemed about to discuss something important. But as a budding gourmand—a phrase which here means “young girl with a strong interest in cooking”—she was eager to get a look at a restaurant kitchen. Ever since Justice Strauss had taken the Baudelaires to the market in order to buy ingredients to make puttanesca sauce, Sunny had been interested in the culinary arts, although it was only recently that she had matured enough to develop this interest. If you have never taken a peek inside a restaurant kitchen, it is something you may want to try, because it is full of interesting items and it is usually quite easy to sneak in, providing that you don’t mind being glared at if you are discovered. But when Sunny stepped through the swinging doors, she did not notice a single interesting item in the kitchen.

For one thing, the kitchen was swirling with steam, from a dozen pots that were boiling in every corner of the room. The cloudy air made it difficult to see much of anything, but that was not the main reason Sunny was ignoring the culinary equipment. There was a conversation going on between two unfathomable figures in the room, and what was being said was far more interesting than any ingredient or gadget used in preparing traditional Indian dishes.

"I have news from J. S.," either Frank or Ernest was whispering to Hal. Both men were standing with their backs to Sunny and leaning in toward one another so they could talk as quietly as possible. Sunny maneuvered into the middle of a particularly thick cloud of steam so that she wouldn't be seen.

"J. S.?" Hal said. "She's here?"

"She's here to help," the manager corrected. "She's been using her Vision Furthering Device to watch the skies, and I'm afraid she reports that we will all be eating crow."

"I'm sorry to hear that," Hal said. "Crow is a tough bird to cook, because the meat is very muscular from all the carrying that crows do."

Sunny scratched her head with one glove in puzzlement. The expression "eating crow" simply means "enduring humiliation," and the youngest Baudelaire had learned it from her parents, who liked to tease each other after playing one another at backgammon. "Bertrand," Sunny could remember her mother saying, tossing the dice to the ground in triumph, "I have won again. Prepare to eat crow." Then, with a gleam in her eyes, she would pounce on Sunny's father and tickle him, while the Baudelaire children piled on top of their parents in a laughing heap. But Hal seemed to be discussing the eating of crow as an actual culinary dish, rather than a figure of speech, and the youngest Baudelaire wondered if there were more to this Indian restaurant than she had thought.

"It is a shame," agreed either Frank or Ernest. "If only there was something that could make the dish a little sweeter. I've heard that certain mushrooms are available."

"Sugar would be better than mushrooms," Hal said unfathomably.

"According to our calculations, the sugar will be laundered sometime after nightfall," replied the manager, equally unfathomably.

"I'm glad," Hal said. "My job's been difficult enough. Do you know how many leaves of lettuce I've had to send up to the roof?"

Frank or Ernest frowned. "Tell me," he said, in an even more quiet tone of voice. "Are you who I think you are?"

"Are *you* who *I* think you are?" replied Hal, equally quietly.

Sunny crept closer, hoping to hear more of the conversation to learn if either Frank or Ernest was referring to the Medusoid Mycelium, which was a type of mushroom, or if Hal was referring to the sugar bowl. But to the youngest Baudelaire's dismay the floor creaked slightly, and the cloud of steam swirled away, and Hal and Ernest, or perhaps Frank, spun around to gasp at her.

"Are you who I think you are?" said the two men in unison.

One of the advantages of being taciturn is that it is rare for your words to get you into trouble. A taciturn writer, for instance, might produce only one short poem every ten years, which is unlikely to annoy anyone, whereas someone who writes twelve or thirteen books in a relatively short time is likely to find themselves hiding under the coffee table of a notorious villain, holding his breath, hoping nobody at the cocktail party will notice the trembling backgammon set, and wondering, as the ink-stain spreads across the carpeting, if certain literary exercises have been entirely worthwhile. If Sunny had decided to adopt a chatty demeanor, she would have had to think of a lengthy reply to the question she had just been asked, and she could not imagine what that reply might be. If she knew that the manager in the kitchen was Frank, she would say something along the lines of, "Sunny Baudelaire please help," which was her way of saying, "Yes, I'm Sunny Baudelaire, and my siblings and I need your help uncovering the mysterious plot unfolding in the Hotel Denouement, and signaling our findings to the members of V.F.D." If she knew that it was Ernest who was staring at her, she would say something more like, “No Habla Esperanto,” which was her way of saying, “I’m sorry; I don’t know what you’re talking about.” The presence of Hal, of course, made the situation even more complicated, because the children had exited their employment at Heimlich Hospital’s Library of Records by mutual agreement, as Hal believed that they were responsible for lighting the Library of Records on fire, and the Baudelaires needed to flee the hospital as quickly as possible, but Sunny had no way of knowing if Hal continued to hold a grudge—a phrase which here means “was an enemy of the Baudelaires”—or if he was working at the hotel as a volunteer. But Sunny had adopted a taciturn demeanor, and a taciturn answer was all that was required.

“Concierge,” she said, and that was enough. Hal looked at Frank, or perhaps it was Ernest, and Ernest, or perhaps it was Frank, looked back at Hal. The two men nodded, and then crossed to a shiny cabinet at the far end of the kitchen. Hal opened the cabinet and handed a large, strange object to either Frank or Ernest, who looked it over and handed it to Sunny. The object was like a large, metal spider, with curly wires spreading out in all directions, but where the head of the spider might have been was the keyboard of a typewriter.

“Do you know what this is?” asked the villain or volunteer.

“Yes,” the youngest Baudelaire said. Sunny had never seen such a device, but her siblings had described the strange lock they had encountered in a secret passageway hidden deep within the Mortmain Mountains. Had it not been for Violet’s knowledge of science and Klaus’s remarkable memory for Russian literature, they might never have opened the lock, and Sunny would still be Count Olaf’s captive.

“Be very careful with it,” said either Frank or Ernest. “When you place this device on the knob of an ordinary door, and press the letters V, F, and D, it will become a Vernacularly Fastened Door. I want you to take the elevator to the basement, and vernacularly fasten Room 025.”

“That’s the laundry room, you know,” said Hal, squinting at Sunny through his glasses. “As with many laundry rooms, there’s a vent, which funnels the steam from all the washing machines to the outside, so the room doesn't overheat."

"But if something were to fall from the sky at just the right angle," said Frank or Ernest, "it might fall down the funnel and into the room. And if that something were very valuable, then the room ought to be locked up tight, so that the item would not fall into the wrong hands."

Sunny Baudelaire had no idea what these two adults were talking about, and wished that she were still standing unnoticed in the steam, so she could observe the rest of their conversation. But she gripped the strange lock in her gloved hands and knew that it was not time to be a flaneur.

"I'm grateful for your assistance, concierge," Frank said, or maybe it was Ernest, or maybe the man answering was neither brother. "Not many people have the courage to help with a scheme like this."

Sunny gave one more taciturn nod, and turned to exit the kitchen. In silence she walked through the swinging doors and across the restaurant, not even pausing to listen to the whispered conversation Vice Principal Nero was having with Mr. Remora and Mrs. Bass, and in silence she opened the door to Room 954 and walked down the hallway to the elevator. It was only when she was traveling down to the basement that Sunny's silence was shattered by an enormous noise.

The clock in the lobby of the Hotel Denouement is the stuff of legend, a phrase which here means "very famous for being very loud." It is located in the very center of the ceiling, at the very top of the dome, and when the clock announces the hour, its bells clang throughout the entire building, making an immense, deep noise that sounds like a certain word being uttered once for each hour. At this particular moment, it was three o'clock, and everyone in the hotel could hear the booming ring of the enormous bells of the clock, uttering the word three times in succession: *Wrong! Wrong! Wrong!*

As she walked through the sliding doors of the elevator and down the basement hallway, past the ornamental vases and numbered doors, Sunny Baudelaire felt as if the clock were scolding her for her efforts at solving the mysteries of the Hotel Denouement. *Wrong!* She had tried her best to be a flaneur, but hadn't observed enough to discover what two teachers and a vice principal from Prufrock Preparatory School were doing at the hotel. *Wrong!* She had tried to communicate with one of the hotel's managers, but had been unable to discover whether he was Frank or Ernest, or whether Hal was a volunteer or an enemy. And—most *Wrong!* of all—she was performing an errand as a concierge, and was now turning the entrance to the laundry room into a Vernacularly Fastened Door for some unknown, sinister purpose. With each strike of the clock, Sunny felt wronger and wronger, until at last she reached Room 025, where a washerwoman with long, blond hair and rumpled clothing was just shutting the door on her way out. With a hurried nod, the washerwoman padded down the hallway. Sunny dearly hoped her two siblings had found more success in their errands, for as she placed the lock on the doorknob, and typed the letters V-F-D into the typewriter keyboard, all the youngest Baudelaire could think was that everything was wrong, wrong, wrong.

ALSO NOT A CHAPTER

At this point, the history of the Baudelaire orphans reverts to its sequential format, and if you are interested in finishing the story, you should read the chapters in the order in which they appear, although I dearly hope you are not interested in finishing the story, any more than the story is interested in finishing you.

CHAPTER
Seven

Quite a few things happened that day after the clock struck three and each *Wrong!* echoed throughout the immense and perplexing world of the Hotel Denouement. On the ninth story, a woman was suddenly recognized by a chemist, and the two of them had a fit of giggles. In the basement, a strange sight was reported by an ambidextrous man who spoke into a walkie-talkie. On the sixth story, one of the housekeepers removed a disguise, and drilled a hole behind an ornamental vase in order to examine the cables that held one of the elevators in place, while listening to the faint sound of a very annoying song coming from a room just above her. In Room 296, a volunteer suddenly realized that the Hebrew language is read from right to left rather than left to right, which meant that it should be read from left to right rather than right to left in the mirror, and in the coffee shop, located in Room 178, a villain requested sugar in his coffee, was immediately thrown to the floor so a waitress could see if he had a tattoo on his ankle, and then received an apology and a free slice of rhubarb pie for all his trouble. In Room 174, a banker picked up the phone only to find no one on the line, and in Room 594, a family sat unnoticed among tanks of tropical fish, with only a suitcase of dirty laundry for company, unaware that underneath a cushion of a sofa in the lobby was the doily for which they had been searching for more than nine years. Just outside the hotel, a taxi driver gazed down at the funnel spouting steam into the sky, and wondered if a certain man with an unusually shaped back would ever return and claim the suitcases that still lay in the trunk, and on the other side of the hotel, a woman in a diving helmet and a shiny suit shone a flashlight through the water and tried to see to the murky bottom of the sea. At the opposite end of the city, a long, black automobile took a woman away from a man she loved, and in another city, miles and miles from the Baudelaires, four children played at the beach, unaware that they were about to receive some very dreadful news, and in yet another city, neither the one where the Baudelaires lived nor the one I just mentioned, someone else learned something and there was some sort of fuss, or so I have been led to believe. With each *Wrong!* of the clock, as the afternoon slipped into evening, countless things happened, not only in the immense and perplexing world of the Hotel Denouement, but also in the immense and perplexing world that lay outside its brick walls, but the Baudelaire orphans did not think of any of these things. Curiously, their errands as concierges kept them in the lobby for the rest of the afternoon, so they had no more occasion to venture into the small elevators and observe anything further as flaneurs, and spent the hours fetching things back and forth across the lobby, but the siblings did not think of the objects they were fetching, or the guests who were waiting for them, or even the tall, skinny figure of either Frank or Ernest, who would occasionally rush by them on errands of his own. As evening approached, and the bells behind their desk rang less and less frequently, Violet, Klaus, and Sunny thought only of the things that had happened to them. They thought only of what each of them had observed, and they wondered what in the world it all might mean.

Finally, just as either Frank or Ernest had predicted, night arrived and the hotel grew very quiet, and the three siblings gathered behind the large, wooden desk to talk, leaning their backs against the wall and stretching out their legs until their feet almost touched the bells. Violet told the story of Esmé Squalor, Carmelita Spats, and Geraldine Julienne in the rooftop sunbathing salon, and either Frank or Ernest in the lobby. Klaus told the story of Sir and Charles in Room 674, and either Frank or Ernest in the sauna. And Sunny told the story of Vice Principal Nero, Mr. Remora, and

Mrs. Bass in Room 371, and either Frank or Ernest, and Hal in the Indian restaurant in Room 954. Klaus took careful note of everything in his commonplace book, giving the book to Violet when it was his turn to speak, and all three Baudelaires interrupted each other with questions and ideas, but when all the stories had been told, and the children looked at the countless details inked onto the paper, everything that happened to them was as mysterious as it had been that morning.

“It just doesn’t make any sense,” Violet said. “Why is Esmé Squalor planning a party? Why did Carmelita Spats request a harpoon gun?”

“Why are Sir and Charles here?” Klaus asked. “Why is there birdpaper hanging out of the window of the sauna?”

“Why Nero?” Sunny asked. “Why Remora? Why Bass? Why Hal?”

“Who is J. S.?” Violet asked. “Is he a man lurking in the basement, or is she a woman watching the skies?”

“Where is Count Olaf?” Klaus asked. “Why has he invited so many of our former guardians here to the hotel?”

“Frankernest,” Sunny said, and this was perhaps the most mysterious question of all. Violet, Klaus, and Sunny had each encountered one of the managers just moments before the clock struck three. Kit Snicket had told them that if they observed everyone they saw, they could tell the villains from the volunteers, but the Baudelaires did not know which sibling had encountered which manager, and they simply could not imagine how two people could be in three places at once. The Baudelaires pondered their situation in a silence broken only by a strange, repetitive sound that seemed to be coming from outside. For a moment, this sound was yet another mystery, but the siblings soon realized it was the croaking of frogs. The pond must have had thousands of frogs living in its depths, and now that night had arrived, the frogs had come to the surface and were communicating with one another in the guttural sound of their species. It was an unfathomable sound, as if even the natural world were a code the Baudelaires could not decipher.

"Kit said that all would not go well," Violet said. "She said our errands may be noble, but that we would not succeed."

"That's true," agreed Klaus. "She said all our hopes would go up in smoke, and maybe she was right. We each observed a different story, but none of the stories makes any sense."

"Elephant," Sunny said.

Violet and Klaus looked at their sister curiously.

"Poem," she said. "Father."

Violet and Klaus looked at one another in puzzlement.

"Elephant," Sunny insisted, but this was one of the rare occasions that Violet and Klaus did not understand what their sister was saying. The brow furrowed on Sunny's little forehead as she struggled to remember something that might help make herself clear to her siblings. Finally, she looked up at Violet and Klaus. "John Godfrey Saxe," she said, and all three Baudelaires smiled.

The name John Godfrey Saxe is not likely to mean anything to you, unless you are a fan of American humorist poets of the nineteenth century. There are not many such people in the world, but the Baudelaires' father was one of them, and had several poems committed to memory. From time to time he would get into a whimsical mood—the word "whimsical," as you probably know, means "odd and impulsive"—and would grab the nearest Baudelaire child, bounce him or her up and down on his lap, and recite a poem by John Godfrey Saxe about an elephant. In the poem, six blind men encountered an elephant for the first time and were unable to agree on what the animal was like. The first man felt the tall, smooth side of the elephant, and concluded that an elephant was like a wall. The second man felt the tusk of the elephant, and decided that an elephant resembled a spear. The third man felt the trunk of the elephant, and the fourth felt one of the elephant's legs, and so on and so on, with all of the blind men bickering over what an elephant is like. As with many children, Violet and Klaus had grown old enough to find their father's whimsical moods a little embarrassing, so Sunny had become the primary audience for Mr. Baudelaire's poetry recital, and remembered the poem best.

"That poem could have been written about us," Violet said. "We've each observed one tiny part of the puzzle, but none of us has seen the entire thing."

"Nobody could see the entire thing," Klaus said. "There's a mystery behind every door at the Hotel Denouement, and nobody can be everywhere at once, observing all the volunteers and all the villains."

"We've still got to try," Violet said. "Kit said that the sugar bowl was on its way to this hotel. We have to stop it from falling into the hands of the impostor."

"But the sugar bowl could be hidden anywhere," Klaus said, "and the impostor could be anyone. Everyone we observed was talking about J. S., but we still don't know who he or she is."

"'Each was partly in the right,'" Sunny recited, from the penultimate verse of the elephant poem.

Her siblings smiled, and chimed in to finish the line. "'And all were in the wrong,'" they said together, but the last word was drowned out by another sound, or perhaps it would be more proper to say that the last "wrong" was drowned out by another. *Wrong!* called the clock of the Hotel Denouement. *Wrong! Wrong! Wrong! Wrong! Wrong! Wrong! Wrong! Wrong! Wrong! Wrong! Wrong!*

"It's late," Klaus said, as the twelfth *Wrong!* faded. "I hadn't realized we'd been talking for so long." He and his sisters stood up and stretched, and saw that the lobby had grown empty and silent. The lid of the grand piano was closed. The cascading fountain had been turned off. Even the reception desk was empty, as if the Hotel Denouement was not expecting any more guests until the morning. The light from the frog-shaped lamp, and of course the Baudelaires themselves, were the only signs of life underneath the enormous domed ceiling.

“I guess the guests are asleep,” Violet said, “or they’re staying up all night reading, like Frank said.”

“Or Ernest,” Sunny reminded her.

“Maybe we should try to sleep as well,” Klaus said. “We have one more day to solve these mysteries, and we should be well-rested when that day arrives.”

“I suppose there won’t be much to observe after dark,” Violet said.

“Tired,” Sunny yawned.

The siblings nodded, but all three orphans just stood there. It did not seem right to sleep when so many enemies were lurking around the hotel, hatching sinister plots. But such events go on every night, not just in the Hotel Denouement but all over the world, and even the noblest of volunteers needs to get a little shut-eye, a phrase which here means “lie down behind a large, wooden desk and hope that nobody rings for the concierge until morning.” The children would have preferred more comfortable sleeping circumstances, of course, but it had been a very long time since such circumstances were available, and so without any further discussion they bid one another good night, and Klaus reached up and turned off the frog-shaped lamp. For a moment the three children lay there in the darkness, listening to the croaking coming from the pond outside.

“It’s dark,” Sunny said. The youngest Baudelaire was not particularly afraid of the dark, but just felt like mentioning it, in case her siblings were nervous.

“It *is* dark,” Violet agreed, with a yawn. “With my sunglasses on, it’s as dark as—what did Kit Snicket say?—as dark as a crow flying through a pitch black night.”

“That’s it,” Klaus said suddenly. His sisters heard him stand up in the dark, and then he turned the frog lamp back on, making them both blink behind their sunglasses.

“What’s it?” Violet said. “I thought we were going to sleep.”

“How can we sleep,” Klaus asked, “when the sugar bowl is being delivered to the hotel this very night?”

“What?” Sunny asked. “How?”

Klaus pulled his commonplace book out of his pocket and flipped to the notes he had taken on what the Baudelaires had observed. “By crow,” he said.

“Crow?” Violet said.

“It wouldn’t be the first time crows have carried something important,” Klaus said, reminding his sisters of the crows in the Village of Fowl Devotees, who had brought the Baudelaires messages from the Quagmires. “That’s what Esmé Squalor has been watching for with her Vision Furthering Device.”

“J. S. too,” Sunny said, remembering what either Frank or Ernest had said about watching the skies.

“And that’s why Carmelita Spats had me fetch a harpoon gun,” Violet said thoughtfully. “To shoot down the crows, so V.F.D. can never get the sugar bowl.”

“And that’s why either Frank or Ernest had me hang birdpaper outside the window of the sauna,” Klaus said. “If the crows are hit with the harpoon gun, they’ll fall onto the birdpaper, and he’ll know that the delivery had been unsuccessful.”

“But was it Frank who had you lay out the birdpaper,” Violet asked, “or Ernest? If it was Frank, then the birdpaper will serve as a signal to volunteers that they have been defeated. And if it was Ernest, then the birdpaper will serve as a signal to villains that they have triumphed.”

“And what about the sugar bowl?” Klaus asked. “The crows will drop the sugar bowl if the harpoon hits them.” He frowned at a page of his commonplace book. “If the crows drop a heavy object like that,” he said, “it will fall straight down into the pond.”

“Maybe no,” Sunny said.

“Where else could it land?” Violet said.

“Spynsickle,” Sunny said, which was her way of saying “laundry room.”

“How would it get into the laundry room?” Klaus asked.

“The funnel,” Sunny said. “Frank said. Or Ernest.”

“So they had you place a lock on the laundry room door,” Violet said, “so that nobody could get to the sugar bowl.”

“But did Frank have Sunny activate the lock,” Klaus asked, “or Ernest? If it was Frank, then the sugar bowl is locked away from any villains who want to get their hands on it. But if it was Ernest, then the sugar bowl is locked away from any volunteers who ought to get their hands on it.”

“J. S.,” Sunny said.

“J. S. is the key to the entire mystery,” Violet agreed. “Esmé Squalor thinks J. S. is spoiling the party. Sir thinks J. S. is hosting the party. Hal thinks J. S. might be here to help. Kit thinks J. S. might be an enemy. And we still don’t even know if J. S. is a man or a woman!”

“Like blind men,” Sunny said, “with elephant.”

“We have to find J. S.,” Klaus agreed, “but how? Trying to locate one guest in an enormous hotel is like finding one book in a library.”

“A library without a catalog,” Violet said quietly, and the three Baudelaires exchanged sad glances by the light of the frog-shaped lamp. The children had uncovered countless secrets in libraries under the most desperate of circumstances. They had decoded a message in a library while a hurricane raged outside, and had found important information while a sinister person chased them around a library in wicked shoes. They had discovered crucial facts in a library that held only three books, and obtained a vital map in a library that was only a pile of papers hidden underneath a table. The Baudelaires had even found the answers they were looking for in a library that had burned down, leaving only a few scraps of paper and a motto etched on an iron archway. Violet, Klaus, and Sunny stood for a moment at the concierge desk and thought of all the libraries they had seen, and wondered if any of the secrets they had uncovered would help them find what they were looking for in the perplexing library of the Hotel Denouement.

“The world is quiet here,” Sunny said, reciting the motto her siblings had found, and as her words echoed in the lobby, they heard a noise above them, a quiet shuffling from the enormous dome, scarcely audible over the sound of the croaking frogs. The shuffling grew louder, but the Baudelaires could not see anything in the blackness over their heads, which was as dark as a crow flying through a pitch black night. Finally, Violet lifted the frog-shaped lamp as far as its cord would allow, and all three children removed their sunglasses. Faintly, they could see a shadowy shape lowering itself from the machinery of the clock using what looked like a thick rope. It was an eerie sight, like a spider lowering itself to the center of a web, but the Baudelaires could not help but admire the skill with which it was done. With only a slight shuffle, the shape drew closer and closer, until at last the children could see it was a man, tall and skinny, with his legs and arms sticking out at odd angles, as if he were made of drinking straws instead of flesh and bone. The man was climbing down a rope he was unraveling at the same time, which is an activity I do not recommend unless you’ve had the proper training, and unfortunately the best trainer has been forced to go into hiding ever since a certain mountain headquarters was destroyed by arson, and he now earns his living doing spider imitations in a traveling show. Finally, the man was quite close to the ground, and with an elegant flourish he let go of the rope and landed silently on the floor. Then he strode toward the Baudelaires, pausing only to brush a speck of dust off the word MANAGER which was printed in fancy script over one of the pockets of his coat.

“Good evening, Baudelaires,” the man said. “Forgive me for not revealing myself earlier, but I had to be sure that you were who I thought you were. It must have been very confusing to wander around this hotel without a catalog to help you.”

“So there *is* a catalog?” Klaus asked.

“Of course there’s a catalog,” the man said. “You don’t think I’d organize this entire building according to the Dewey Decimal System and then neglect to add a catalog, do you?”

“But where is the catalog?” Violet asked.

The man smiled. “Come outside,” he said, “and I’ll show you.”

“Trap,” Sunny murmured to her siblings, who nodded in agreement. “We’re not following you,” Violet said, “until we know that you’re someone we can trust.”

The man smiled. “I don’t blame you for being suspicious,” he said. “When I used to meet your father, Baudelaires, we would recite the work of an American humorist poet of the nineteenth century, so we could recognize one another in our disguises.” He stopped in the middle of the lobby, and with a gesture from one of his odd, skinny arms, he began to recite a poem:

“So oft in theologic wars,

The disputants, I ween,

Rail on in utter ignorance

Of what each other mean,

And prate about an Elephant

Not one of them has seen!”

The words of the American humorist poets of the nineteenth century are often confusing, as they are liable to use such terms as “oft,” which is a nineteenth-century abbreviation for “often”; “disputants,” which refers to people who are arguing; “ween,” which means “think”; and “rail on,” which means to bicker for hours on end, the way you might do with a family member who is particularly bossy. Such poets might use the word “prate,” which means “chatter,” and they might spend an entire stanza discussing “theologic wars,” a term which refers to arguing over what different people believe, the way you might also do with a family member who is particularly bossy. Even the Baudelaires, who’d had the works of American humorist poets of the nineteenth century recited to them many times over their childhood, had trouble understanding everything in the stanza, which simply made the point that all of the blind men in the poem were arguing pointlessly. But Violet, Klaus, and Sunny did not need to know exactly what the stanza meant. They only needed to know who wrote it.

“John Godfrey Saxe,” said Sunny with a smile.

“Very good,” the man said, and he walked across the shiny, silent floor of the lobby, pulling the rope down from the ceiling and tucking it into his belt.

“And who are you?” Violet called.

“Can’t you guess?” the man asked, pausing at the large, curved entrance. The Baudelaires hurried to catch up with him as he turned to exit the hotel.

“Frank?” Klaus said.

“No,” the man said, and began to walk down the stairs. The Baudelaires took a step outside, where the croaking of the frogs in the pond was considerably louder, although the children could not see the pond through the cloud of steam coming from the funnel. Violet, Klaus, and Sunny looked at one another cautiously, and then began to follow.

“Ernest?” Sunny asked.

The man smiled, and kept walking down the stairs, disappearing into the steam. “No,” he said, and the Baudelaire orphans stepped out of the hotel and disappeared along with him.

CHAPTER
Eight

The word “denouement” is not only the name of a hotel or the family who manages it, particularly nowadays, when the hotel and all its secrets have almost been forgotten, and the surviving members of the family have changed their names and are working in smaller, less glamorous inns. “Denouement” comes from the French, who use the word to describe the act of untying a knot, and it refers to the unraveling of a confusing or mysterious story, such as the lives of the Baudelaire orphans, or anyone else you know whose life is filled with unanswered questions. The denouement is the moment when all of the knots of a story are untied, and all the threads are unraveled, and everything is laid out clearly for the world to see. But the denouement should not be confused with the end of a story. The denouement of “Snow White,” for instance, occurs at the moment when Ms. White wakes up from her enchanted sleep, and decides to leave the dwarves behind and marry the handsome prince, and the mysterious old woman who gave her an apple has been exposed as the treacherous queen, but the end of “Snow White” occurs many years later, when a horseback riding accident plunges Ms. White into a fever from which she never recovers. The denouement of “Goldilocks and the Three Bears” occurs at the moment when the bears return home to find Goldilocks napping on their private property, and either chase her away from the premises, or eat her, depending on which version you have in your library, but the end of “Goldilocks and the Three Bears” occurs when a troop of young scouts neglect to extinguish their campfire and even the efforts of a volunteer fire department cannot save most of the wildlife from certain death. There are some stories in which the denouement and the end occur simultaneously, such as *La Forza del Destino*, in which the characters recognize and destroy one another over the course of a single song, but usually the denouement of a story is not the last event in the heroes' lives, or the last trouble that befalls them. It is often the second-to-last event, or the penultimate peril. As the Baudelaire orphans followed the mysterious man out of the hotel and through the cloud of steam to the edge of the reflective pond, the denouement of their story was fast approaching, but the end of their story still waited for them, like a secret still covered in fog, or a distant island in the midst of a troubled sea, whose waves raged against the shores of a city and the walls of a perplexing hotel.

"You must have thousands of questions, Baudelaires," said the man. "And just think—right here is where they can be answered."

"Who are you?" Violet asked.

"I'm Dewey Denouement," Dewey Denouement replied. "The third triplet. Haven't you heard of me?"

"No," Klaus said. "We thought there were only Frank and Ernest."

"Frank and Ernest get all the attention," Dewey said. "They get to walk around the hotel managing everything, while I just hide in the shadows and wind the clock." He gave the Baudelaires an enormous sigh, and scowled into the depths of the pond. "That's what I don't like about V.F.D.," he said. "All the smoke and mirrors."

"Smoke?" Sunny asked.

"'Smoke and mirrors,'" Klaus explained, "means 'trickery used to cover up the truth.' But what does that have to do with V.F.D.?"

"Before the schism," Dewey said, "V.F.D. was like a public library. Anyone could join us and have access to all of the information we'd acquired. Volunteers all over the globe were reading each other's research, learning of each other's observations, and borrowing each other's books.

For a while it seemed as if we might keep the whole world safe, secure, and smart."

"It must have been a wonderful time," Klaus said.

"I scarcely remember it," Dewey said. "I was four years old when the schism began. I was scarcely tall enough to reach my favorite shelf in the family library—the books labeled 020. But one night, just as our parents were hanging balloons for our fifth birthday party, my brothers and I were taken."

"Taken where?" Violet asked.

"Taken by whom?" Sunny asked.

"I admire your curiosity," Dewey said. "The woman who took me said that one can remain alive long past the usual date of disintegration if one is unafraid of change, insatiable in intellectual curiosity, interested in big things, and happy in small ways. And she took me to a place high in the mountains, where she said such things would be encouraged."

Klaus opened his commonplace book and began to take furious notes. "The headquarters," Klaus said, "in the Valley of Four Drafts."

"Your parents must have missed you," Violet said.

"They perished that very night," Dewey said, "in a terrible fire. I don't have to tell you how badly I felt when I learned the news."

The Baudelaires sighed, and looked out at the pond. Here and there on its calm surface they could see the reflections of a few lights in the windows, but most of the hotel was dark, so most of the pond was dark, too. The triplet, of course, did not have to tell the Baudelaires how it felt to lose one's parents so suddenly, or at such a young age. "It was not always this way, Baudelaires," Dewey said. "Once there were safe places scattered across the globe, and so orphans like yourselves did not have to wander from place to place, trying to find noble people who could be of assistance. With each generation, the schism gets worse. If justice does not prevail, soon there will be no safe places left, and nobody left to remember how the world ought to be."

"I don't understand," Violet said. "Why weren't we taken, like you?"

"You were," Dewey said. "You were taken into the custody of Count Olaf. And he tried to keep you in his custody, no matter how many noble people intervened."

"But why didn't anyone tell us what was going on?" Klaus asked. "Why did we have to figure things out all by ourselves?"

"I'm afraid that's the wicked way of the world," Dewey said, with a shake of his head. "Everything's covered in smoke and mirrors, Baudelaires. Since the schism, all the research, all the observations, even all of the books have been scattered all over the globe. It's like the elephant in the poem your father loved. Everyone has their hands on a tiny piece of the truth, but nobody can see the whole thing. Very soon, however, all that will change."

"Thursday," Sunny said.

"Exactly," Dewey said, smiling down at the youngest Baudelaire. "At long last, all of the noble people will be gathered together, along with all the research they've done, all the observations they've made, all the evidence they've collected, and all the books they've read. Just as a library catalog can tell you where a certain book is located, this catalog can tell you the location and behavior of every volunteer and every villain." He gestured to the hotel. "For years," he said, "while noble people wandered the world observing treachery, my comrade and I have been right here gathering all the information together. We've copied every note from every commonplace book from every volunteer and compiled it all into a catalog. Occasionally, when volunteers have been lost or safe places destroyed, we've had to go ourselves to collect the information that has been left behind. We've retrieved Josephine Anwhistle's files from Lake Lachrymose and carefully copied down their contents. We've pasted together the burnt scraps of Madame Lulu's archival library and taken notes on what we've found. We've searched the childhood home of the man with a beard but no hair, and interviewed the math teacher of the woman with hair but no beard. We’ve memorized important articles within the stacks of newspaper in Paltryville, and we’ve thrown important items out of the windows of our destroyed headquarters, so they might wind up somewhere safe at sea. We’ve taken every crime, every theft, every wicked deed, and every incident of rudeness since the schism began, and cataloged them into an entire library of misfortune. Eventually, every crucial secret ends up in my catalog. It’s been my life’s work. It has not been an easy life, but it has been an informative one.”

“You’re more than a volunteer,” Violet said. “You’re a librarian.”

“I’m more of a sub-sub-librarian,” Dewey said modestly. “That’s what your parents used to call me, because my library work has been largely undercover and underground. Every villain in the world would want to destroy all this evidence, so it’s been necessary to hide my life’s work away.”

“But where could you hide something that enormous?” Klaus said. “It would be like hiding an elephant. A catalog that immense would have to be as big as the hotel itself.”

“It is,” Dewey said, with a sly expression on his face. “In fact, it’s *exactly* as big as the hotel.”

Violet and Klaus turned their gaze from Dewey to look at each other in confusion, but Sunny was gazing neither at the sub-sub-librarian nor at her siblings, but down at the dark surface of the pond. “!ahA” she said, pointing a small, gloved finger at the calm, still water.

“Exactly,” Dewey said. “The truth has been right under everyone’s noses, if anyone cared to look past the surface. Volunteers and villains alike know that the last safe place is the Hotel Denouement, but no one has ever questioned why the sign is written backward. They’re staying in the TNEMEUONED LETOH, while the *real* last safe place—the catalog—is hidden safely at the bottom of the pond, in underwater rooms organized in a mirror image of the hotel itself. Our enemies could burn the entire building to the ground, but the most important secrets would be safe.”

“But if the location of the catalog is such an important secret,” Violet said, “why are you telling us?”

“Because you should know,” Dewey said. “You’ve wandered the world, observing more villainy and gathering more evidence than most people do in a lifetime. I’m sure the observations and evidence you’ve gathered in your commonplace book will be valuable contributions to the catalog. Who better than you to keep the world’s most important secrets?” He looked out at the pond, and then at each orphan in turn. “After Thursday,” he continued, “you won’t have to be at sea anymore, Baudelaires.” The children knew that by the expression “at sea” he meant “lost and confused,” and hearing those words brought tears to their eyes. “I hope you decide to make this your permanent home. I need someone with an inventive imagination who can improve on the aquatic design of the catalog. I need someone with the sort of research skills that can expand the catalog until it is the finest in the world. And, of course, we’ll need to eat, and I’ve heard wonderful things about Sunny’s cooking.”

“Efcharisto,” Sunny said modestly.

“Hal’s meals are atrocious, I’m afraid,” Dewey said with a rueful smile. “I don’t know why he insisted on opening his restaurant in Room 954, when so many other suitable rooms were available. Bad food of any style is unpleasant, but bad Indian food is possibly the worst.”

“Hal is a volunteer?” Klaus asked, remembering what Sunny had observed during her errands as a concierge.

“In a manner of speaking,” Dewey said, using an expression which here means “sort of.” “After the fire that destroyed Heimlich Hospital, my comrade arrived on the scene to catalog any information that might have survived. She found Hal in a very distraught condition. His Library of Records was in shambles, and he had nowhere to live. She offered him a position at the Hotel Denouement, where he might aid us in our research and learn to cook. Unfortunately he’s only been good at one of those things.”

"And what about Charles?" Violet asked, remembering what Klaus had observed during his errands.

"Charles has been searching for you since you left the lumbermill," Dewey said. "He cares for you, Baudelaires, despite the selfish and dreadful behavior of his partner. You've seen your share of wicked people, Baudelaires, but you've seen your share of people as noble as you are."

"I'm not sure we *are* noble," Klaus said quietly, flipping the pages of his commonplace book. "We caused those accidents at the lumbermill. We're responsible for the destruction of the hospital. We helped start the fire that destroyed Madame Lulu's archival library. We—"

"Enough," Dewey interrupted gently, putting a hand on Klaus's shoulder. "You're noble enough, Baudelaires. That's all we can ask for in this world."

The middle Baudelaire hung his head, so he was leaning against the sub-sub-librarian, and his sisters huddled against him, and all four volunteers stood for a moment silently in the dark. Tears fell from the eyes of the orphans—all four of them—and, as with many tears shed at night, they could not have said exactly why they were crying, although I know why I am crying as I type this, and it is not because of the onions that someone is slicing in the next room, or because of the wretched curry he is planning on making with them. I am crying because Dewey Denouement was wrong. He was not wrong when he said the Baudelaires were noble enough, although I suppose many people might argue about such a thing, if they were sitting around a room together without a deck of cards or something good to read. Dewey was wrong when he said that being noble enough is all we can ask for in this world, because we can ask for much more than that. We can ask for a second helping of pound cake, even though someone has made it quite clear that we will not get any. We can ask for a new watercolor set, even though it will be pointed out that we never used the old one, and that all of the paints dried into a crumbly mess. We can ask for Japanese fighting fish, to keep us company in our bedroom, and we can ask for a special camera that will allow us to take photographs even in the dark, for obvious reasons, and we can ask for an extra sugar cube in our coffees in the morning and an extra pillow in our beds at night. We can ask for justice, and we can ask for a handkerchief, and we can ask for cupcakes, and we can ask for all the soldiers in the world to lay down their weapons and join us in a rousing chorus of “Cry Me a River,” if that happens to be our favorite song. But we can also ask for something we are much more likely to get, and that is to find a person or two, somewhere in our travels, who will tell us that we are noble enough, whether it is true or not. We can ask for someone who will say, “You are noble enough,” and remind us of our good qualities when we have forgotten them, or cast them into doubt. Most of us, of course, have parents and friends who tell us such things, after we have lost a badminton tournament or failed to capture a notorious counterfeiter who we discovered aboard a certain motorboat. But the Baudelaire orphans, of course, had no living parents, and their closest friends were high in the sky, in a self-sustaining hot air mobile home, battling eagles and a terrible henchman who had hooks instead of hands, so the acquaintance of Dewey Denouement, and the comforting words he had uttered, were a blessing. The Baudelaires stood with the sub-sub-librarian, grateful for this blessing, and at the sound of an approaching automobile, they looked to see two more blessings arriving via taxi, and were grateful all over again.

“Baudelaires!” called a familiar voice.

“Baudelaires!” called another one.

The siblings peered through the dark at the two figures emerging from the taxi, scarcely able to believe their eyes. These people were wearing strange eyeglasses made of two large cones that were attached to their heads with a mass of tangled rope, which was coiled up on top of their heads. Such glasses might have concealed the identity of the people who were wearing them, but the Baudelaires had no trouble recognizing the people who were hurrying toward them, even though they had not seen either person for a very long time, and had thought they would never see them again.

“Justice Strauss!” Violet cried.

“Jerome Squalor!” Klaus cried.

“J. S.!” Sunny cried.

“I’m so happy to find you,” said the judge, taking off her Vision Furthering Device so she could dab at her eyes and embrace the children one by one. “I was afraid I’d never see you again. I’ll never forgive myself for letting that idiotic banker take you away from me.”

“And I’ll never forgive myself,” said Jerome, who had the misfortune of being married to Esmé Squalor, “for walking away from you children. I’m afraid I wasn’t a very good guardian.”

“And I’m afraid I wasn’t a guardian at all,” Justice Strauss said. “As soon as you were taken away in that automobile, I knew I had done the wrong thing, and when I heard the dreadful news about Dr. Montgomery I began searching for you. Eventually I found other people who were also trying to battle the wicked villains of this world, but I always hoped I would find you myself, if only to say how sorry I was.”

“I’m sorry, too,” Jerome said. “As soon as I heard about all the troubles that befell you in the Village of Fowl Devotees, I began my own Baudelaire search. Volunteers were leaving me messages everywhere—at least, I thought the messages were addressed to me.”

“And I thought they were addressed to *me,*” Justice Strauss said. “There are certainly plenty of people with the initials J. S.”

“I began to feel like an impostor,” Jerome said.

“You’re not impostors,” Dewey said. “You’re volunteers.” He turned to the Baudelaires. “Both these people have helped us immeasurably,” he said, using a word which here means “a whole lot.” “Justice Strauss has reported the details of your case to the other judges in the High Court. And Jerome Squalor has done some critical research on injustice.”

“I was inspired by my wife,” Jerome confessed, removing his Vision Furthering Device. “Wherever I looked for you, Baudelaires, I found selfish plots to steal your fortune. I read books on injustice in all the libraries you left behind and eventually wrote a book myself. *Odious Lusting After*

Finance chronicles the history of greedy villains, treacherous girlfriends, bungling bankers, and all the other people responsible for injustice.”

“No matter what we do, however,” Justice Strauss said, “we can’t erase the wrongs we did you, Baudelaires.”

“She’s right,” Jerome Squalor said. “We should have been as noble as you are.”

“You’re noble enough,” Violet said, and her siblings nodded in agreement, as the judge and the injustice expert embraced them again. When someone has disappointed you, as Justice Strauss and Jerome Squalor disappointed the Baudelaires, it is often difficult to decide whether to continue their acquaintance, even if the disappointers have done noble things in the meantime. There are some who say that you should forgive everyone, even the people who have disappointed you immeasurably. There are others who say you should not forgive anyone, and should stomp off in a huff no matter how many times they apologize. Of these two philosophies, the second one is of course much more fun, but it can also grow exhausting to stomp off in a huff every time someone has disappointed you, as everyone disappoints everyone eventually, and one can’t stomp off in a huff every minute of the day. When the Baudelaires thought about the harm that each J. S. had done to them, it was as if they had gotten a bruise quite some time ago, one that had mostly faded but that still hurt when they touched it, and when they touched this bruise it made them want to stomp off in a huff. But on that evening—or, more properly, very early Wednesday morning—the siblings did not want to stomp off into the hotel, where so many wicked people were gathered, or into the pond, which was likely to be very cold and clammy at this time of night. They wanted to forgive these two adults, and to embrace them, despite their disappointment.

“I don’t mean to break up all this embracing,” Dewey said, “but we have work to do, volunteers. As one of the first volunteers said a very long time ago, ‘Though boys throw stones at frogs in sport, the frogs do not die in sport, but in earnest.’”

“Speaking of frogs,” Justice Strauss said, “I’m afraid to report that we couldn’t see a thing from the other side of the pond. These Vision

Furthering Devices work well in the daytime, but looking through special sunglasses after sunset makes everything look as dark as a crow flying through a pitch black night—which is precisely what we're looking for."

"Justice Strauss is correct," Jerome said sadly. "We couldn't verify the arrival of the crows, or whether their journey was interrupted."

"We couldn't see if even a single crow was trapped," the judge said, "or if the sugar bowl fell into the funnel."

"Funnel?" Dewey repeated.

"Yes," Justice Strauss said. "You told us that if our enemies shot down the crows, they would have fallen onto the birdpaper."

"And if the crows fell onto the birdpaper," Jerome continued, "then the sugar bowl would drop into the laundry room, right?"

Dewey looked slyly at the steaming funnel, and then at the surface of the pond. "So it would appear," he said. "Our enemies capturing the sugar bowl would be as troubling as their capture of the Medusoid Mycelium."

"So you already know about the plan to shoot down the crows, and capture the sugar bowl?" Violet said incredulously.

"Yes," Dewey said. "Justice Strauss learned that the harpoon gun had been taken up to the rooftop sunbathing salon. Jerome noticed that birdpaper was dangling out of the window of the sauna in Room 613. And I gave Sunny the lock myself, so she could lock up the laundry in Room 025."

"You know about all the villainous people who are lurking in the hotel?" Klaus said, equally incredulously.

"Yes," Justice Strauss said. "We observed rings on all the wooden furniture, from people refusing to use coasters. Obviously there are many villains staying in the hotel."

“Mycelium?” Sunny asked, with perhaps just a touch more incredulousness than her siblings.

“Yes,” Jerome said. “We’ve learned that Olaf has managed to acquire a few spores locked tight in a diving helmet.”

The Baudelaires looked at the commonplace book in Klaus’s hands, and then back at the sub-sub-librarian. “I guess our observations and evidence aren’t such valuable contributions after all,” Violet said. “All the mysteries we encountered in the hotel had already been solved.”

“It doesn’t matter, Baudelaires,” Jerome said. “Olaf won’t dare unleash the Medusoid Mycelium unless he gets his hands on the sugar bowl, and he’ll never find it.”

“I’m the only one who knows which words will unlock the Vernacularly Fastened Door,” Dewey said, ushering the children back toward the entrance of the hotel, “and there’s not a villainous person on Earth who has done enough reading to guess them before Thursday. By then, all of the volunteers will present the research they’ve done on Count Olaf and his associates to the prosecution, and all their treachery will finally end.”

“Jerome Squalor will be an important witness,” Justice Strauss said. “His comprehensive history of injustice will help the High Court reach a verdict.”

“Prosecution?” Violet asked.

“Witness?” Klaus asked.

“Verdict?” Sunny said.

The three adults smiled at one another, and then at the Baudelaires. “That’s what we’ve been trying to tell you,” Dewey said gently. “V.F.D. has researched an entire catalog of Olaf’s treachery. On Thursday, Justice Strauss and the other judges of the High Court will hear from each and every one of our volunteers. Count Olaf, Esmé Squalor, and all of the other villainous people gathered here will finally be brought to justice.”

"You'll never have to hide from Olaf again," Jerome said, "or worry that anyone will steal your fortune."

"We just have to wait for tomorrow, Baudelaires," Justice Strauss said, "and your troubles will finally be over."

"It's like my comrade always says," Dewey said. "Right, temporarily defeated, is stronger than evil triumphant."

Wrong! The clanging of the clock announced that it was one in the morning, and without another word, Dewey took Violet's hand, and Justice Strauss took Klaus's, and Jerome Squalor leaned down and took Sunny's hand, and the three adults led the three orphans up the stairs toward the hotel's entrance, walking past the taxi, which still sat there, engine purring, with the figure of the driver just a shadow in the window. The three adults smiled at the children, and the children smiled back, but of course the Baudelaires were not born yesterday, an expression which means "young or innocent enough to believe things certain people say about the world." If the Baudelaires had been born yesterday, perhaps they would be innocent enough to believe that all of their troubles were truly about to end, and that Count Olaf and all of his treacherous associates would be judged by the High Court, and condemned to the proper punishment for all their ignoble deeds, and that the children would spend the rest of their days working with Dewey Denouement on his enormous underwater catalog, if they only waited for tomorrow. But the three siblings were not born yesterday. Violet was born more than fifteen years before this particular Wednesday, and Klaus was born approximately two years after that, and even Sunny, who had just passed out of babyhood, was not born yesterday. Neither were you, unless of course I am wrong, in which case welcome to the world, little baby, and congratulations on learning to read so early in life. But if you were not born yesterday, and you have read anything about the Baudelaire children's lives, then you cannot be surprised that this happy moment was almost immediately cut short by the appearance of a most unwelcome person at the moment the children were led through the fog of steam coming from the laundry room funnel and through the entrance of the Hotel Denouement as the one loud *Wrong!* faded into nothing. This person was standing in the center of the lobby, his tall lean body bent into a theatrical pose as if he were waiting for a crowd to applaud, and you will not be surprised to know what was tattooed on his ankle, which the children could see poking out of a hole in his sock even in the dim light of the room. You were not born yesterday, probably, so you will not be surprised to find that this notorious villain had reappeared in the Baudelaires' lives for the penultimate time, and the Baudelaires were also not born yesterday, and so they also were not surprised. They were not born yesterday, but when Count Olaf turned to face them, and gazed upon them with his shiny, shiny eyes, the Baudelaire orphans wished they had not been born at all.

CHAPTER
Nine

“Ha!” Count Olaf shrieked, pointing at the Baudelaire orphans with a bony finger, and the children were thankful for small mercies. A small mercy is simply a tiny thing that has gone right in a world gone wrong, like a sprig of delicious parsley next to a spoiled tuna sandwich, or a lovely dandelion in a garden that is being devoured by vicious goats. A small mercy, like a small flyswatter, is unlikely to be of any real help, but nevertheless the three siblings, even in their horror and disgust at seeing Olaf again, were thankful for the small mercy that the villain had apparently lost interest in his new laugh. The last time the Baudelaires had seen the villain, he’d been aboard a strange submarine shaped like an octopus, and he’d developed a laugh that was equally strange, full of snorts and squeaks and words that happened to begin with the letter H. But as the villain strode toward the children and the adults who were clutching their hands, it was clear he had since adopted a style of laughter that was succinct, a word which here means “only the word ‘ha.’” “Ha!” he cried. “I knew I’d find you orphans again! Ha! And now you’re in my clutches! Ha!”

“We’re not in your clutches,” Violet said. “We just happen to be standing in the same room.”

“That’s what you think, orphan,” Olaf sneered. “I’m afraid the man who’s holding your hand is one of my associates. Hand her over, Ernest. Ha!”

“Ha yourself, Olaf,” said Dewey Denouement. His voice was firm and confident, but Violet felt his hand trembling in hers. “I’m not Ernest, and I’m not handing her over!”

“Well, then hand her over, Frank!” Olaf said. “You might consider doing your hair differently so I can tell you apart.”

“I’m not Frank, either,” Dewey said.

“You can’t fool me!” Count Olaf growled. “I wasn’t born yesterday, you know! You’re one of those idiotic twins! I should know! Thanks to me, you two are the only survivors of the entire family!”

“Triplets run in my family,” Dewey said, “not twins. I’m Dewey Denouement.”

At this, Count Olaf’s one eyebrow raised in astonishment. “Dewey Denouement,” he murmured. “So you’re a real person! I always thought you were a legendary figure, like unicorns or Giuseppe Verdi.”

“Giuseppe Verdi is not a legendary figure,” Klaus said indignantly. “He’s an operatic composer!”

“Silence, bookworm!” Olaf ordered. “Children should not speak while adults are arguing! Hand over the orphans, adults!”

“Nobody’s handing over the Baudelaires!” Justice Strauss said, clutching Klaus’s hand. “You have no legal right to them or their fortune!”

“You can’t just grab children as if they were pieces of fruit in a bowl!” Jerome Squalor cried. “It’s injustice, and we won’t have it!”

“You’d better watch yourselves,” Count Olaf said, narrowing his shiny eyes. “I have associates lurking everywhere in this hotel.”

“So do we,” Dewey said. “Many volunteers have arrived early, and within hours the streets will be flooded with taxis carrying noble people here to this hotel.”

“How can you be sure they’re noble people?” Count Olaf asked. “A taxi will pick up anyone who signals for one.”

“These people are associates of ours,” Dewey said fiercely. “They won’t fail us.”

“Ha!” Count Olaf said. “You can’t rely on associates. More comrades have failed me than I can count. Why, Hooky and Fiona double-crossed me just yesterday, and let you brats escape! Then they double-crossed me again and stole my submarine!”

“We can rely on our friends,” Violet said quietly, “more than you can rely on yours.”

“Is that so?” Count Olaf asked, and leaned toward the children with a ravenous smile. “Have you learned nothing after all your adventures?” he asked. “Every noble person has failed you, Baudelaires. Why, look at the idiots standing next to you! A judge who let me marry you, a man who gave up on you altogether, and a sub-sub-librarian who spends his life sneaking around taking notes. They’re hardly a noble bunch.”

“Charles is here, from Lucky Smells Lumbermill,” Klaus said. “He cares about us.”

“Sir is here,” Olaf retorted. “He doesn’t. Ha!”

“Hal,” Sunny said.

“Vice Principal Nero and Mr. Remora,” Olaf replied, counting each nasty person on his filthy fingers. “And that pesky little reporter from *The Daily Punctilio*, who’s here to write silly articles praising my cocktail party.

And ridiculous Mr. Poe, who arrived just hours ago to investigate a bank robbery. Ha!”

“Those people don’t count,” Klaus said. “They’re not associates of yours.”

“They might as well be,” Count Olaf replied. “They’ve been an enormous help. And every second, more associates of mine get closer and closer.”

“So do our friends,” Violet said. “They’re flying across the sea as we speak, and by tomorrow, their self-sustaining hot air mobile home will land on the roof.”

“Only if they’ve managed to survive my eagles,” Count Olaf said with a growl.

“They will,” Klaus said. “Just like we’ve survived you.”

“And how did you survive me?” Olaf asked. “*The Daily Punctilio* is full of your crimes. You lied to people. You stole. You abandoned people in danger. You set fires. Time after time you’ve relied on treachery to survive, just like everyone else. There are no truly noble people in this world.”

“Our parents,” Sunny said fiercely.

Count Olaf looked surprised that Sunny had spoken, and then gave all three Baudelaires a smile that made them shudder. “I guess the sub-sub-librarian hasn’t told you the story about your parents,” he said, “and a box of poison darts. Why don’t you ask him, orphans? Why don’t you ask this legendary librarian about that fateful evening at the opera?”

The Baudelaires turned to look at Dewey, who had begun to blush. But before they could ask him anything, they were interrupted by a voice coming from a pair of sliding doors that had quietly opened.

“Don’t ask him that,” Esmé Squalor said. “I have a much more important question.”

With a mocking laugh, the treacherous girlfriend emerged from the elevator, her silver sandals clumping on the floor and her lettuce leaves rustling against her skin. Behind her was Carmelita Spats, who was still wearing her ballplaying cowboy superhero soldier pirate outfit and carrying the harpoon gun Violet had delivered, and behind her three more people emerged from the elevator. First came the attendant from the rooftop sunbathing salon, still wearing green sunglasses and a long, baggy robe. Following the attendant was the mysterious chemist from outside the sauna, dressed in a long, white coat and a surgical mask, and last out of the elevator was the washerwoman from the laundry room, with long, blond hair and rumpled clothing. The Baudelaires recognized these people from their observations as flaneurs, but then the attendant removed his robe to reveal his back, which had a small hump on the shoulder, and the chemist removed her surgical mask, not with one of her hands but with one of her feet, and the washerwoman removed a long, blond wig with both hands at the exact same time, and the three siblings recognized the three henchfolk all over again.

“Hugo!” cried Violet.

“Colette!” cried Klaus.

“Kevin!” cried Sunny.

“Esmé!” cried Jerome.

“Why isn’t anybody calling out my name?” demanded Carmelita, stomping one of her bright blue boots. She pranced toward Violet, who observed that two of the four long, sharp hooks were missing from the weapon. This sort of observation may be important for a flaneur, but it is dreadful for any reader of this book, who probably does not want to know where the remaining harpoons will end up. “I’m a ballplaying cowboy superhero soldier pirate,” she crowed to the oldest Baudelaire, “and you’re nothing but a cakesniffer. Call my name or I’ll shoot you with this harpoon gun!”

“Carmelita!” Esmé said, her silver mouth twisting into an expression of shock. “Don’t point that gun at Violet!”

“Esmé’s right,” Count Olaf said. “Don’t waste the harpoons. We may need them.”

“Yes!” Esmé cried. “There’s always important work to do before a cocktail party, particularly if you want it to be the innest in the world! We need to put slipcovers on the couches, and hide our associates beneath them! We need to put vases of flowers on the piano and electric eels in the fountain! We need to hang streamers and volunteers from the ceiling! We need to play music, so people can dance, and block the exits, so they can’t leave! And most of all, we have to cook in food and prepare in cocktails! Food and drink are the most important aspect of every social occasion, and our in recipes—”

“The most important aspect of every social occasion isn’t food and drink!” Dewey interrupted indignantly. “It’s conversation!”

“You’re the one who should flee!” Justice Strauss said. “Your cocktail party will be canceled, due to the host and hostess being brought to justice by the High Court!”

“You’re as foolish as you were when we were neighbors,” Count Olaf said. “The High Court can’t stop us. V.F.D. can’t stop us. Hidden somewhere in this hotel is one of the most deadly fungi in the entire world. When Thursday comes, the fungus will come out of hiding and destroy everyone it touches! At last I’ll be free to steal the Baudelaire fortune and perform any other act of treachery that springs to mind!”

“You won’t dare unleash the Medusoid Mycelium,” Dewey said. “Not while I have the sugar bowl.”

“Funny you should mention the sugar bowl,” Esmé Squalor said, although the Baudelaires could see she didn’t think it was funny at all. “That’s just what we want to ask you about.”

“The sugar bowl?” Count Olaf asked, his eyes shining bright. “Where is it?”

“The freaks will tell you,” Esmé said.

"It's true, boss," said Hugo. "I may be a mere hunchback, but I saw Carmelita shoot down the crows using the harpoon gun Violet brought her."

Justice Strauss turned to Violet in astonishment. "*You* gave Carmelita the harpoon gun?" she gasped.

"Well, yes," Violet said. "I had to perform concierge errands as part of my disguise."

"The harpoon gun was supposed to be kept away from villains," the judge said, "not given to them. Why didn't Frank stop you?"

Violet thought back to her unfathomable conversation with Frank. "I think he tried," she said quietly, "but I had to take the harpoon gun up to the roof. What else could I do?"

"I hit two crows!" bragged Carmelita Spats. "That means Countie has to teach me how to spit like a real ballplaying cowboy superhero soldier pirate!"

"Don't worry, darling," Esmé said. "He'll teach you. Won't you, Olaf?"

Count Olaf sighed, as if he had better things to do than teach a little girl how to propel saliva out of her mouth. "Yes, Carmelita," he said, "I'll teach you how to spit."

Colette took center stage, a phrase which here means "stepped forward, and twisted her body into an unusual shape." "Even a contortionist like me," she said, her mouth moving beneath her elbow, "could see what happened after Carmelita shot the crows. They fell right onto the birdpaper that Klaus dangled out the window."

"*You* dangled the birdpaper out the window?" Jerome asked the middle Baudelaire.

"Ernest told me to," Klaus said, finally realizing which manager had spoken to him in the sauna. "I had to obey him as part of my disguise."

"You can't just do what everyone tells you to do," Jerome said.

“What else could I do?” Klaus said.

“When the crows hit the birdpaper,” Kevin said, gesturing with one hand and then the other, “they dropped the sugar bowl. I didn’t see where it went with either my right eye or my left one, which I’m sad to say are equally strong. But I did see Sunny turn the door of the laundry room into a Vernacularly Fastened Door.”

“Aha!” Count Olaf cried. “The sugar bowl must have fallen down the funnel!”

“I still don’t see why I had to disguise myself as a washerwoman,” Kevin said timidly. “I could have just been a washerperson, and not worn this humiliating wig.”

“Or you could have been a noble person,” Violet could not help adding, “instead of spying on a brave volunteer.”

“What else could I do?” Kevin asked, shrugging both shoulders equally high.

“You could be a volunteer yourself,” Klaus said, looking at all of his former carnival coworkers. “All of you could stand with us now, instead of helping Count Olaf with his schemes.”

“I could never be a noble person,” Hugo said sadly. “I have a hump on my back.”

“And I’m a contortionist,” Colette said. “Someone who can bend their body into unusual shapes could never be a volunteer.”

“V.F.D. would never accept an ambidextrous person,” Kevin said. “It’s my destiny to be a treacherous person.”

“Galimatias!” Sunny cried.

“Nonsense!” Dewey said, who understood at once what Sunny had said. “I’m ambidextrous myself, and I’ve managed to do something worthwhile with my life. Being treacherous isn’t your destiny! It’s your choice!”

“I’m glad you feel that way,” Esmé Squalor said. “You have a choice this very moment, Frank. Tell me where the sugar bowl is, or else!”

“That’s not a choice,” Dewey said, “and I’m not Frank.”

Esmé frowned. “Then you have a choice this very moment, Ernest. Tell me where the sugar bowl is, or—”

“Dewey,” Sunny said.

Esmé blinked at the youngest Baudelaire, who noticed that the villainous woman’s eyelashes had also been painted silver. “What?” she asked.

“It’s true,” Olaf said. “He’s the real sub-sub. It turns out he’s not legendary, like Verdi.”

“Is that so?” Esmé Squalor said. “So someone has really been cataloging everything that has happened between us?”

“It’s been my life’s work,” Dewey said. “Eventually, every crucial secret ends up in my catalog.”

“Then you know all about the sugar bowl,” Esmé said, “and what’s inside. You know how important that thing was, and how many lives were lost in the quest to find it. You know how difficult it was to find a container that could hold it safely, securely, and attractively. You know what it means to the Baudelaires and what it means to the Snickets.” She took one sandaled step closer to Dewey, and stretched out one silver fingernail—the one shaped like an S—until it was almost poking him in the eye. “And you know,” she said in a terrible voice, “that it is *mine*.”

“Not anymore,” Dewey said.

“Beatrice stole it from *me*!” Esmé cried.

“There are worse things,” Dewey said, “than theft.”

At this, the girlfriend gave the sub-sub-librarian a chuckle that made the Baudelaires' blood run cold. "There certainly are," she said, and strode toward Carmelita Spats. With one spiky fingernail—the one shaped like an M—she moved the harpoon gun so it was pointing at the triplet. "Tell me how to open that door," she said, "or this little girl will harpoon you."

"I'm not a little girl!" Carmelita reminded Esmé nastily. "I'm a ballplaying cowboy superhero soldier pirate! And I'm not going to shoot any more harpoons until Countie teaches me how to spit."

"You'll do what we say, Carmelita," Olaf growled. "I already purchased that ridiculous outfit for you, and that boat for you to prowl the swimming pool. Point that weapon at Dewey this instant!"

"Teach me to spit!" Carmelita said.

"Point the weapon!"

"Teach me to spit!"

"Point the weapon!"

"Teach me to spit!"

"Weapon!"

"Spit!"

"Weapon!"

"Spit!"

With a raspy roar, Count Olaf roughly yanked the harpoon gun out of Carmelita's hands, knocking her to the floor. "I'll never teach you how to spit as long as I live!" he shouted. "Ha!"

"Darling!" Esmé gasped. "You can't break your promise to our darling little girl!"

“I’m not a darling little girl!” Carmelita screamed. *“I’m a ballplaying cowboy superhero soldier pirate!*”

“You’re a spoiled baby!” Olaf corrected. “I never wanted a brat like you around anyway! It’s about time you were shown some discipline!”

“But discipline is out!” Esmé said.

“I don’t care what’s out and what’s in!” Count Olaf cried. “I’m tired of having a girlfriend obsessed with fashion! All you do is sit around rooftop sunbathing salons while I run around doing all the work!”

“If I hadn’t been on the roof,” Esmé retorted, “the sugar bowl would have been delivered to V.F.D.! Besides, I was guarding—”

“Never mind what you were doing,” Olaf said. “You’re fired!”

“You can’t fire me!” Esmé growled. “I quit!”

“Well, you can leave by mutual agreement,” Olaf grumbled, and then, with another succinct “Ha!” he lifted the harpoon gun and pointed it at Dewey Denouement. “Tell us the three phrases we need to type into the lock in order to open the Vernacularly Fastened Door and search the laundry room!”

“You won’t find anything in the laundry room,” Dewey said, “except piles of dirty sheets, a few washing and drying machines, and some extremely flammable chemicals.”

“I may have a handsome, youthful glow,” Olaf snarled, “but I wasn’t born yesterday! Ha! If there’s nothing in the laundry room, why did you put a V.F.D. lock on the door?”

“Perhaps it’s just a decoy,” Dewey said, his hand still trembling in Violet’s.

“Decoy?” Olaf said.

"'Decoy' is a word with several meanings," the triplet explained. "It can refer to a corner of a pond where ducks can be captured, or to an imitation of a duck or other animal used to attract a real specimen. Or, it can mean something used to distract people, such as a lock on a door that does not contain a certain sugar bowl."

"If the lock is a decoy, sub-sub," Count Olaf sneered, "then you won't mind telling me how to open it."

"Very well," Dewey said, still struggling to sound calm. "The first phrase is a description of a medical condition that all three Baudelaire children share."

The Baudelaires shared a smile.

"The second phrase is the weapon that left you an orphan, Olaf," Dewey said.

The Baudelaires shared a frown.

"And the third," Dewey said, "is the famous unfathomable question in the best-known novel by Richard Wright."

The Baudelaire sisters shared a look of confusion, and then looked hopefully at Klaus, who slowly shook his head.

"I don't have time to medically examine the Baudelaires," Olaf said, "or shove my face into any best-known novels!"

"Wicked people never have time for reading," Dewey said. "It's one of the reasons for their wickedness."

"I've had enough of your games!" Count Olaf roared. "Ha! If I don't hear the exact phrases used to open the lock by the time Esmé counts to ten, I'll fire the harpoon gun and tear you to shreds! Esmé, count to ten!"

"I'm not counting to ten," Esmé pouted. "I'm not going to do anything for you ever again!"

"I knew it!" Jerome said. "I knew you could be a noble person again, Esmé! You don't have to parade around in an indecent bikini in the middle of the night threatening sub-sub-librarians! You can stand with us, in the name of justice."

"Let's not go overboard," Esmé said. "Just because I'm dumping my boyfriend doesn't mean I'm going to be a goody-goody like you. Justice is out. Injustice is in. That's why it's called *in*justice."

"You should do what's right in this world," Justice Strauss said, "not just what's fashionable. I understand your situation, Esmé. When I was your age, I spent years as a horse thief before realizing—"

"I don't want to hear your boring stories," Count Olaf snarled. "The only thing I want to hear are three exact phrases from Dewey's mouth, or his destiny will be death by harpoon, as soon as I say the number ten. *One!*"

"Stop!" Justice Strauss cried. "In the name of the law!"

"*Two!*"

"Stop!" Jerome Squalor pleaded. "In the name of injustice!"

"*Three!*"

"*Stop!*" Violet ordered, and her siblings nodded in fierce agreement. The Baudelaires realized, as I'm sure you have realized, that the adults standing with them were going to do nothing that would stop Count Olaf from reaching ten and pulling the trigger of the harpoon gun, and that Justice Strauss and Jerome Squalor would fail them, as so many noble people had failed them before. But the siblings also knew that this failure would not hurt them—at least, not right away. It would hurt Dewey Denouement, and without another word the three children dropped the hands of the adults and stood in front of the sub-sub-librarian, shielding him from harm.

"You can't harpoon this man," Klaus said to Count Olaf, scarcely believing what he was saying. "You'll have to harpoon us first."

“Or,” Sunny said, “put down gun.”

Dewey Denoument looked too amazed to speak, but Count Olaf merely turned his disdainful gaze from the sub-sub-librarian to the three children. “I wouldn’t mind harpooning you either, orphans,” he said, his eyes shining bright. “When it comes to slaughtering people, I’m very flexible! Ha! *Four!*”

Violet took a step toward the count, who was holding the harpoon gun so it pointed at her chest. “Lay down your weapon, Olaf,” the eldest Baudelaire said. “You don’t want to do this wicked thing.”

Count Olaf blinked, but did not move the gun. “Of course I do,” he said. “If the sub-sub doesn’t tell me how to get the sugar bowl, I’ll pull the trigger no matter who’s standing in front of me! Ha! *Five!*”

Klaus took a step forward, joining his sister. “You have a choice,” he said. “You can choose not to pull that trigger!”

“And you can choose death by harpoon!” Count Olaf cried. “*Six!*”

“Please,” Sunny said, joining her sisters. The villain did not move, but standing together, the three Baudelaires walked closer and closer to the harpoon gun, shielding Dewey all the while.

“*Seven!*”

“*Please,*” the youngest Baudelaire said again. The Baudelaires walked slowly but steadily toward the harpoon gun, their echoing footsteps the only sound in the silent lobby except for Olaf’s shrieking of higher and higher numbers.

“*Eight!*”

They walked closer.

“*Nine!*”

The children took one last step, and silently put their hands on the harpoon gun, which felt ice cold, even through their white gloves. They tried to pull the weapon out of Olaf's hands, but their first guardian did not let go, and for a long moment the youngsters and the adult were gathered around the terrible weapon in silence. Violet stared at the hooked tip of one harpoon that was pressed against her chest. Klaus stared straight ahead at the bright red trigger that could press at any moment, and Sunny stared into Olaf's shiny, shiny eyes for even the smallest sign of nobility.

"What else can I do?" the villain asked, so quietly the children could not be sure they had heard him correctly.

"Give us the gun," Violet said. "It's not your destiny to do this treacherous deed."

"Give us the gun," Klaus said. "It's not your destiny to be a wicked person."

"*La Forza del Destino,*" Sunny said, and then nobody said anything more. It was so quiet in the lobby that the Baudelaires could hear Olaf draw breath as he got ready to shout the word "ten."

But then, in an instant, they heard another sound, specifically a very loud cough, and in an instant everything changed, which is the wicked way of the world. In an instant, you can light a match and start a fire that can destroy the lives of countless people. In an instant, you can remove a cake from the oven and provide dessert for countless others, assuming that the cake is very large, and the others are not very hungry. In an instant, you can change a few words in a poem by Robert Frost and communicate with your associates through a code known as Verse Fluctuation Declaration, and in an instant, you can realize where something is hidden and decide whether you are going to retrieve it or let it stay hidden, where it might never be found and eventually be forgotten by all but a few very well-read and very distraught figures, who are themselves forgotten by all but a few very well-read and very distraught figures, who in turn are forgotten, and so on, and so on, and so on, and so on, and a few more so ons besides. All this can happen in an instant, as if a single instant is an enormous container, capable of holding countless secrets safely, securely, and attractively, such as the countless secrets held in the Hotel Denouement, or in the hidden underwater catalog in its rippling reflection. But in this instant, in the hotel's enormous lobby, the Baudelaire orphans heard a cough, as loud as it was familiar, and in this instant Count Olaf turned to see who was walking into the lobby, and hurriedly pushed the harpoon gun into the Baudelaires' hands when he saw a figure wearing pajamas with drawings of money all over them and a bewildered expression on his face. In this instant, the three siblings grasped the weapon, feeling its heavy, dark weight in their hands, and in this instant the gun slipped from their hands and clattered to the green wooden floor, and in this instant they heard the red trigger *click!*, and in this instant the penultimate harpoon was fired with a *swoosh!* and sailed through the enormous, domed room and struck someone a fatal blow, a phrase which here means "killed one of the people in the room."

"What's going on?" Mr. Poe demanded, for it was not his destiny to be slain by a harpoon, at least not on this particular evening. "I could hear people arguing all the way from Room 174. What in the world—" and in that instant he stopped, and gazed in horror at the three siblings. "Baudelaires!" he gasped, but he was not the only person gasping. Violet gasped, and Klaus gasped, and Sunny gasped, and Justice Strauss and Jerome Squalor gasped, and Hugo, Colette, and Kevin—who were accustomed to violence from their days as carnival employees and as henchmen to a villain—gasped, and Carmelita Spats gasped, and Esmé Squalor gasped, and even Count Olaf gasped, although it is unusual for a villain to gasp unless he is discovering a crucial secret, or suffering very great pain. But it was Dewey Denouement who gasped loudest of all, louder even than the *Wrong!*s that thundered through the hotel as the clock struck two. *Wrong! Wrong!* the clock thundered, but all the Baudelaires heard was Dewey's pained, choking gasp, as he stumbled backward through the lobby, one hand on his chest, and the other clutching the tail end of the harpoon, which stuck out from his body at an odd angle, like a drinking straw, or a reflection of one of Dewey's skinny arms.

"*Dewey!*" Violet cried.

"*Dewey!*" Klaus cried.

“*Denouement!*” Sunny cried, but the sub-sub-librarian did not answer, and stumbled backward out of the hotel in silence. For a moment, the children were too shocked to move as they watched him disappear into the cloud of steam rising from the laundry room funnel, but then they ran after him, hurrying down the stairs as they heard a *splash!* from the edge of the pond. By the time the Baudelaires reached him, he was already beginning to sink, his trembling body making ripples in the water. There are those who say that the world is like a calm pond, and that anytime a person does even the smallest thing, it is as if a stone has dropped into the pond, spreading circles of ripples further and further out, until the entire world has been changed by one tiny action, but the Baudelaires could not bear to think of the tiny action of the trigger of the harpoon gun, or how the world had changed in just one instant. Instead, they frantically rushed to the edge of the pond as the sub-sub-librarian began to sink. Klaus grabbed one hand, and Sunny grabbed the other, and Violet reached for his face, as if she were comforting someone who had begun to cry.

“You’ll be O.K.,” Violet cried. “Let us get you out of the water.”

Dewey shook his head, and then gave the children a terrible frown, as if he were trying to speak but unable to find the words.

“You’ll survive,” Klaus said, although he knew, both from reading about dreadful events and from dreadful events in his own life, that this simply was not true.

Dewey shook his head again. By now, only his head was above the surface of the water, and his two trembling hands. The children could not see his body, or the harpoon, which was a small mercy.

“We failed you,” Sunny said.

Dewey shook his head one more time, this time very wildly in violent disagreement. He opened his mouth, and reached one hand out of the water, pointing past the Baudelaires toward the dark, dark sky as he struggled to utter the word he most wanted to say. “Kit,” he whispered finally, and then, slipping from the grasp of the children, he disappeared into the dark water, and the Baudelaire orphans wept alone for the mercies denied them, and for the wicked, wicked way of the world.

CHAPTER
Ten

“*What* was that?” a voice called out.

“It sounded like a harpoon gun being fired!” cried another voice.

“A harpoon gun?” asked a third voice. “This is supposed to be a hotel, not a shooting gallery!”

“I heard a splash!” cried someone.

“Me too!” agreed someone else. “It sounded like somebody fell into the pond!”

The Baudelaire orphans gazed at the settling surface of the pond and saw the reflections of shutters and windows opening on every story of the Hotel Denouement. Lights went on, and the silhouettes of people appeared, leaning out of the windows and pointing down at the weeping children, who were too upset to pay much attention to all the shouting.

“What’s all this shouting about?” asked another voice. “I was fast asleep!”

“It’s the middle of the night!” complained someone else. “Why is everybody yelling?”

“I’ll tell you why there’s yelling!” yelled someone. “Someone was shot with a harpoon gun and then fell into the pond!”

“Come back to bed, Bruce,” said someone else.

“I can’t sleep if there’s murderers on the loose!” cried another guest.

“Amen, brother!” said another person. “If a crime has been committed, then it’s our duty to stand around in our pajamas in the name of justice!”

“I can’t sleep anyway!” said somebody. “That lousy Indian food has kept me up all night!”

“Somebody tell me what’s going on!” called a voice. “The readers of *The Daily Punctilio* will want to know what’s happened.”

The sound of the voice of Geraldine Julienne, and the mention of her inaccurate publication, forced the children to stop crying, if only for a moment. They knew it would be wise to postpone their grief—a phrase which here means “mourn the death of Dewey Denouement at a later time”—and make sure that the newspaper printed the truth.

“There’s been an accident,” Violet called, not turning her eyes from the surface of the pond. “A terrible accident.”

“One of the hotel managers has died,” Klaus said.

“Which one?” asked a voice from a high window. “Frank or Ernest?”

“Dewey,” Sunny said.

“There’s no Dewey,” said another voice. “That’s a legendary figure.”

“He’s not a legendary figure!” Violet said indignantly. “He’s a sub—”

Klaus put his hand on his sister’s, and the eldest Baudelaire stopped talking. “Dewey’s catalog is a secret,” he whispered. “We can’t have it announced in *The Daily Punctilio*.”

“But truth,” Sunny murmured.

“Klaus is right,” Violet said. “Dewey asked us to keep his secret, and we can’t fail him.” She looked sadly out at the pond, and wiped the tears from her eyes. “It’s the least we can do,” she said.

“I didn’t realize this was a sad occasion,” said another hotel guest. “We should observe everything carefully, and intrude only if absolutely necessary.”

“I disagree!” said someone in a raspy shout. “We should intrude right now, and observe only if absolutely necessary!”

“We should call the authorities!” said someone else.

“We should call the manager!”

“We should call the concierge!”

“We should call my mother!”

“We should look for clues!”

“We should look for weapons!”

“We should look for my mother!”

“We should look for suspicious people!”

“Suspicious people?” repeated another voice. “But this is supposed to be a nice hotel!”

“Nice hotels are crawling with suspicious people,” someone else remarked. “I saw a washerwoman who was wearing a suspicious wig!”

“I saw a concierge carrying a suspicious item!”

“I saw a taxi carrying a suspicious passenger!”

“I saw a cook preparing suspicious food!”

“I saw an attendant holding a suspicious spatula!”

“I saw a man with a suspicious cloud of smoke!”

“I saw a baby with a suspicious lock!”

“I saw a manager wearing a suspicious uniform!”

“I saw a woman wearing suspicious lettuce!”

“I saw my mother!”

“I can’t see anything!” someone yelled. “It’s as dark as a crow flying through a pitch black night!”

“I see something right now!” cried a voice. “There are three suspicious people standing at the edge of the pond!”

“They’re the people who were talking to the reporter!” cried somebody else. “They’re refusing to show their faces!”

“They must be murderers!” cried yet another person. “Nobody else would act as suspiciously as that!”

“We’d better hurry downstairs,” said one more guest, “before they escape!”

“Wow!” squealed another voice. “Wait until the readers of *The Daily Punctilio* read the headline: ‘VICIOUS MURDER AT HOTEL DENOUEMENT!’ That’s much more exciting than an accident!”

“Mob psychology,” Sunny said, remembering a term Klaus had taught her shortly before she took her first steps.

“Sunny’s right,” said Klaus, wiping his eyes. “This crowd is getting angrier and angrier. In a moment, they’ll all believe we’re murderers.”

“Maybe we are,” Violet said quietly.

“Poppycock!” Sunny said firmly, which meant something like, “Nonsense.” “Accident!”

“It was an accident,” Klaus said, “but it was our fault.”

“Partially,” Sunny said.

“It’s not for us to decide,” Violet said. “We should go inside and talk to Justice Strauss and the others. They’ll know what to do.”

“Maybe,” Klaus said. “Or maybe we should run.”

“Run?” Sunny asked.

“We can’t run,” Violet said. “If we run, everyone will think we’re murderers.”

“Maybe we are,” Klaus pointed out. “All the noble people in that lobby have failed us. We can’t be sure they’ll help us now.”

Violet heaved a great sigh, her breath still shaky from her tears. “Where would we go?” she whispered.

“Anywhere,” Klaus said simply. “We could go somewhere where no one has ever heard of Count Olaf, or V.F.D. There must be other noble people in the world, and we could find them.”

“There are other noble people,” Violet said. “They’re on their way here. Dewey told us to wait until tomorrow. I think we should stay.”

“Tomorrow might be too late,” Klaus said. “I think we should run.”

“Torn,” Sunny said, which meant something along the lines of, “I see the advantages and disadvantages of both plans of action,” but before her siblings could answer, the children felt a shadow over them, and looked up to see a tall, skinny figure standing over them. In the darkness the children could not see any of his features, only the glowing tip of a skinny cigarette in his mouth.

“Do you three need a taxi?” he asked, and gestured to the automobile that had brought Justice Strauss and Jerome Squalor to the entrance of the hotel.

The siblings looked at one another, and then squinted up at the man. The children thought perhaps his voice was familiar, but it might just have been his unfathomable tone, which they’d heard so many times since their arrival at the hotel that it made everything seem familiar and mysterious at the same time.

“We’re not sure,” Violet said, after a moment.

“You’re not sure?” the man asked. “Whenever you see someone in a taxi, they are probably being driven to do some errand. Surely there must be something you need to do, or somewhere you need to go. A great American novelist wrote that people travel faster now, but she wasn’t sure if they do better things. Maybe you would do better things if you traveled at this very moment.”

“We haven’t any money,” Klaus said.

“You needn’t worry about money,” the man said, “not if you’re who I think you are.” He leaned in toward the Baudelaires. “Are you?” he asked. “Are you who I think you are?”

The children looked at each other again. They had no way of knowing, of course, if this man was a volunteer or an enemy, a noble man or a treacherous person. In general, of course, a stranger who tries to get you into an automobile is anything but noble, and in general a person who quotes great American novelists is anything but treacherous, and in general a man who says you needn’t worry about money, or a man who smokes cigarettes, is somewhere in between. But the Baudelaire orphans were not standing in general. They were standing outside the Hotel Denouement, at the edge of a pond where a great secret was hidden, while a crowd of guests grew more and more suspicious about the terrible thing that had just occurred. The children thought of Dewey, and remembered the terrible, terrible sight of him sinking into the pond, and they realized they had no way of knowing if they themselves were good or evil, let alone the mysterious man towering over them.

"We don't know," Sunny said finally.

"Baudelaires!" came a sharp voice at the top of the stairs, followed by a fit of coughing, and the siblings turned to see Mr. Poe, who was staring at the children and covering his mouth with a white handkerchief. "What has happened?" he asked. "Where is that man you shot with the harpoon?"

The Baudelaires were too weary and unhappy to argue with Mr. Poe's description of what happened. "He's dead," Violet said, and found that tears were in her eyes once more.

Mr. Poe coughed once more in astonishment, and then stepped down the stairs and stood in front of the children whose welfare had been his responsibility. "Dead!" he said. "How did that happen?"

"It's difficult to say," Klaus said.

"Difficult to say?" Mr. Poe frowned. "But I saw you, Baudelaires. You were holding the weapon. Surely you can tell me what happened."

"Henribergson," Sunny said, which meant "It's more complicated than that," but Mr. Poe only shook his head as if he'd heard enough.

"You'd better come inside," he said, with a weary sigh. "I must say I'm very disappointed in you children. When I was in charge of your affairs, no matter how many homes I found for you, terrible things occurred. Then, when you decided to handle your own affairs, *The Daily Punctilio* brought more and more news of your treachery with each passing day. And now that I've found you again, I see that once more an unfortunate event has occurred, and another guardian is dead. You should be ashamed of yourselves."

The Baudelaires did not answer. Dewey Denouement, of course, had not been their official guardian at the Hotel Denouement, but he had looked after them, even when they did not know it, and he had done his best to protect them from the villainous people lurking around their home. Even though he wasn't a proper guardian, he was a good guardian, and the children were ashamed of themselves for their participation in his unfortunate death. In silence, they waited while Mr. Poe had another fit of coughing, and then the banker put his hands on the Baudelaires' shoulders, pushing them toward the entrance to the hotel. "There are people who say that criminal behavior is the destiny of children from a broken home," he said. "Perhaps such people are right."

"This isn't our destiny," Klaus said, but he did not sound very sure, and Mr. Poe merely gave him a sad, stern look, and kept pushing. If someone taller than you has ever reached down to push you by the shoulder, then you know this is not a pleasant way to travel, but the Baudelaires were too upset and confused to care. Up the stairs they went, the banker plodding behind them in his ugly pajamas, and only when they reached the cloud of steam that still wafted across the entrance did they think to look back at the mysterious man who had offered them a ride. By then the man was already back inside the taxi and was driving slowly away from the Hotel Denouement, and just as the children had no way of knowing if he was a good person or not, they had no way of knowing if they were sad or relieved to see him go, and even after months of research, and many sleepless nights, and many dreary afternoons spent in front of an enormous pond, throwing stones in the hopes that someone would notice the ripples I was making, I have no way of knowing if the Baudelaires should have been sad or relieved to see him go either. I do know who the man was, and I do know where he went afterward, and I do know the name of the woman who was hiding in the trunk, and the type of musical instrument that was laid carefully in the back seat, and the ingredients of the sandwich tucked into the glove compartment, and even the small item that sat on the passenger seat, still damp from its hiding place, but I cannot tell you if the Baudelaires would have been happier in this man's company, or if it was better that he drove away from the three siblings, looking back at them through the rearview mirror and clutching a monogrammed napkin in his trembling hand. I do know that if they had gotten into his taxi, their troubles at the

Hotel Denouement would not have been their penultimate peril, and they would have had quite a few more woeful events in their lives that would likely take thirteen more books to describe, but I have no way of knowing if it would have been better for the orphans, any more than I know if it would have been better for me had I decided to continue my life's work rather than researching the Baudelaires' story, or if it would have been better for my sister had she decided to join the children at the Hotel Denouement instead of waterskiing toward Captain Widdershins, and, later, waterskiing away from him, or if it would have been better for you to step into that taxicab you saw not so long ago and embark on your own series of events, rather than continuing with the life you have for yourself. There is no way of knowing. When there is no way of knowing, one can only imagine, and I imagine that the Baudelaire orphans were quite frightened indeed when they walked through the entrance to the hotel and saw the crowd of people waiting for them in the lobby.

"There they are!" roared someone from the back of the room. The children could not see who it was, because the lobby was as crowded as it had been when they first set foot in the perplexing hotel. It had been strange to walk through the enormous, domed room that morning, passing unnoticed in their concierge disguises, but this time every person in the lobby was looking directly at them. The children were amazed to see countless familiar faces from every chapter of their lives, and saw many, many people they could not be sure if they recognized or not. Everyone was wearing pajamas, nightgowns, or other sleepwear, and was glaring at the Baudelaires through eyes squinty from being awakened in the middle of the night. It is always interesting to observe what people are wearing in the middle of the night, although there are more pleasant ways to make such observations without being accused of murder. "Those are the murderers!"

"They're no ordinary murderers!" cried Geraldine Julienne, who was wearing a bright yellow nightshirt and had a shower cap over her hair. "They're the Baudelaire orphans!"

A ripple of astonishment went through the pajamaed crowd, and the children wished they had thought to put their sunglasses back on. "The Baudelaire orphans?" cried Sir, whose pajamas had the initials L. S.

stenciled over the pocket, presumably for “Lucky Smells.” “I remember them! They caused accidents in my lumbermill!”

“The accidents weren’t their fault!” Charles said, whose pajamas matched his partner’s. “They were the fault of Count Olaf!”

“Count Olaf is another one of their victims!” cried a woman dressed in a bright pink bathrobe. The Baudelaires recognized her as Mrs. Morrow, one of the citizens of the Village of Fowl Devotees. “He was murdered right in my hometown!”

“That was Count Omar,” said another citizen of the town, a man named Mr. Lesko who apparently slept in the same plaid pants he wore during the day.

“I’m sure the Baudelaires aren’t murderers,” said Jerome Squalor. “I was their guardian, and I always found them to be polite and kind.”

“They were pretty good students, if I remember correctly,” said Mr. Remora, who was wearing a nightcap shaped like a banana.

“They were pretty good students, if I remember correctly,” Vice Principal Nero mimicked. “They were nothing of the sort. Violet and Klaus flunked all sorts of tests, and Sunny was the worst administrative assistant I’ve ever seen!”

“I say they’re criminals,” Mrs. Bass said, adjusting her wig, “and criminals ought to be punished.”

“Yes!” said Hugo. “Criminals are too freakish to be running around loose!”

“They’re not criminals,” Hal said firmly, “and I should know.”

“So should I,” retorted Esmé Squalor, “and I say they’re guilty as sin.” Her long, silver fingernails rested on the shoulder of Carmelita Spats, who was glaring at the siblings as Mr. Poe pushed them past.

“I think they’re guiltier than that!” said one of the hotel bellboys.

“I think they’re even guiltier than you think they are!” cried another.

“I think they look like nice kids!” said someone the children did not recognize.

“I think they look like vicious criminals!” said another person.

“I think they look like noble volunteers!” said another.

“I think they look like treacherous villains!”

“I think they look like concierges!”

“One of them looks a bit like my mother!”

Wrong! Wrong! Wrong! The lobby seemed to shake as the clock struck three in the morning. By now, Mr. Poe had escorted the Baudelaires to a far corner of the lobby, where either Frank or Ernest was waiting next to the door marked 121 with a grim expression on his face as the last *Wrong!* echoed in the enormous room.

“Ladies and gentlemen!” The children turned to see Justice Strauss, who was standing on one of the wooden benches so she could be seen and clapping her hands for attention. “Please settle down! The matter of the Baudelaires’ guilt or innocence is not for you to decide.”

“That doesn’t seem fair,” remarked a man in pajamas with a pattern of salmon swimming upstream. “After all, they woke us up in the middle of the night.”

“The case is a matter for the High Court,” Justice Strauss said. “The authorities have been notified, and the other judges of the court are on their way. We will be able to begin the trial in a matter of hours.”

“I thought the trial was on Thursday,” said a woman in a nightgown emblazoned with dancing clowns.

“Showing up early is one of the signs of a noble person,” Justice Strauss said. “Once the other noble judges have arrived, we will decide on this matter—and other equally important matters—once and for all.”

There was a murmur of discussion in the crowd. “I suppose that’s all right,” grumbled someone.

“All right?” Geraldine Julienne said. “It’s wonderful! I can see the headline now: ‘HIGH COURT FINDS BAUDELAIRES GUILTY!’”

“No one is guilty until the trial is over,” Justice Strauss said, and for the first time the judge gazed down at the children and gave them a gentle smile. It was a small mercy, that smile, and the frightened Baudelaires smiled back. Justice Strauss stepped off the bench and walked through the murmuring crowd, followed by Jerome Squalor.

“Don’t worry, children,” Jerome said. “It looks like you won’t have to wait until tomorrow for justice to be served.”

“I hope so,” Violet said.

“I thought judges weren’t allowed to reach verdicts on people they know,” Klaus said.

“Normally that’s true,” Justice Strauss said. “The law should be impartial and fair. But I think I can be fair where Count Olaf is concerned.”

“Besides,” Jerome said, “there are two other judges on the High Court. Justice Strauss’s opinion is not the only one that matters.”

“I trust my fellow judges,” Justice Strauss said. “I’ve known them for years, and they’ve always been concerned whenever I’ve reported on your case. While we wait for them to arrive, however, I’ve asked the managers of the hotel to put you in Room 121, to keep you away from this angry crowd.”

Without a word, Frank or Ernest unlocked the door and revealed the small, bare closet where Violet had found the harpoon gun. “We’ll be locked up?” Klaus said nervously.

“Just to keep you safe,” Justice Strauss said, “until the trial begins.”

“Yes!” cried a voice the children would never forget. The crowd parted to reveal Count Olaf, who walked toward the Baudelaires with a triumphant gleam in his eyes. “Lock them up!” he said. “We can’t have treacherous people running around the hotel! There are noble, decent people here.”

“Really?” asked Colette.

“Ha!” Count Olaf said. “I mean, of course! The High Court will decide who’s noble and who’s wicked. In the meantime, the orphans should be locked in a closet.”

“Hear hear!” Kevin said, raising one arm and then the other in an ambidextrous salute.

“They’re not the only ones,” Justice Strauss said sternly. “You, sir, have also been accused of a great deal of treachery, and the High Court is very interested in your case as well. You will be locked in Room 165 until the trial begins.”

The man who was not Frank but Ernest, or vice versa, stepped sternly out of the crowd and took Olaf’s arm.

“Fair enough,” said Olaf. “I’m happy to wait for the verdict of the High Court. Ha!”

The three siblings looked at one another, and then around the lobby, where the crowd was looking fiercely back at them. They did not want to be locked in a small room, no matter what the reason, and they could not understand why the idea of the High Court reaching a verdict on Count Olaf made him laugh. However, they knew that arguing with the crowd would be bootless, a word which here means “likely to get the siblings in even more trouble,” and so without another word, the three Baudelaires stepped inside the closet. Jerome and Justice Strauss gave them a little wave, and Mr. Poe gave them a little cough, and either Frank or Ernest stepped forward to shut the door. At the sight of the manager, the children suddenly thought not of Dewey, but of the family left behind, just as Violet, Klaus, and Sunny were all left behind after that first day at Briny Beach, and the dreadful news they received there.

“We’re sorry,” Sunny said, and the manager looked down at the youngest Baudelaire and blinked. Perhaps he was Frank, and thought the Baudelaires had done something wicked, or perhaps he was Ernest, and thought the Baudelaires had done something noble, but in either case the manager looked surprised that the children were sorry. For a moment, he paused, and gave them a tiny nod, but then he shut the door and the Baudelaire children were alone. The door of Room 121 was surprisingly thick, and although the light of the lobby shone clearly through the gap at the bottom of the door, the noise of the crowd was nothing but a faint buzzing, like a swarm of bees or the workings of a machine. The orphans sank to the floor, exhausted from their busy day and their terrible, terrible night. They took off their shoes and leaned against one another in the cramped surroundings, trying to find a comfortable position and listening to the buzz of the arguing crowd in the lobby.

“What will happen to us?” Violet asked.

“I don’t know,” Klaus said.

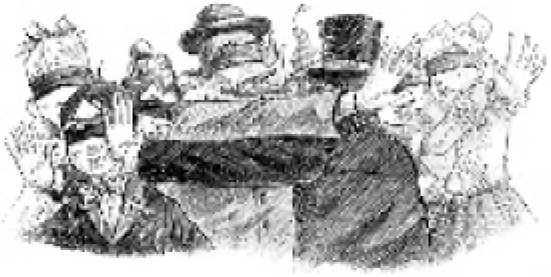
“Perhaps we should have run,” Violet said, “like you suggested, Klaus.”

“Perhaps at a trial,” the middle Baudelaire said, “the villains at last will be brought to justice.”

“Olaf,” Sunny asked, “or us?”

What Sunny asked, of course, was whether Count Olaf was the villain who would be brought to justice, or if it would be the three Baudelaires, but her siblings had no answer for her. Instead, the eldest Baudelaire leaned down and kissed the top of her sister’s head, and Klaus leaned up to kiss Violet’s, and Sunny moved her head first to the right and then to the left, to kiss both of them. If you had been in the lobby of the Hotel Denouement, you would not have heard anything from behind the thick door of Room 121, as the Baudelaires ended their conversation with a great, shuddering sigh, and nestled close to one another in the small space. You would have had to be on the other side of the door, leaning against the children yourself, to hear the tiny, quiet sounds as the Baudelaire orphans cried themselves to sleep, unable to answer Sunny’s question.

CHAPTER
Eleven



An old expression, used even before the schism, says that people should not see the creation of laws or sausages. This makes sense, as the creation of sausages involves taking various parts of different animals and shaping them until they are presentable at breakfast, and the creation of laws involves taking various parts of different ideas and shaping them until they are presentable at breakfast, and most people prefer to spend their breakfasts eating food and reading the newspaper without being exposed to creation of any sort whatsoever.

The High Court, like most courts, was not involved in the creation of laws, but it was involved in the interpretation of laws, which is as perplexing and unfathomable as their creation, and like the interpretation of sausages is something that also should not be seen. If you were to put this book down, and travel to the pond that now reflects nothing but a few burnt scraps of wood and the empty skies, and if you were to find the hidden passageway that leads to the underwater catalog that has remained secret and safe for all these years, you could read an account of an interpretation of sausages that went horribly wrong and led to the destruction of a very important bathyscaphe, all because I mistakenly thought the sausages were arranged in the shape of a K when actually the waiter had been trying to make an R, and an account of an interpretation of the law that went horribly wrong, although it would hardly be worth the trip as that account is also contained in the remaining chapters of this book, but if you were at all sensible you would shield your eyes from such interpretations, as they are too dreadful to read. As Violet, Klaus, and Sunny caught a few winks—a phrase which here means "slept fitfully in the closet-sized Room 121"—arrangements were made for the trial, during which the three judges of the High Court would interpret the laws and decide on the nobility and treachery of Count Olaf and the Baudelaires, but the children were surprised to learn, when a sharp knock on the door awakened them, that they would not see this interpretation themselves.

"Here are your blindfolds," said one of the managers, opening the door and handing the children three pieces of black cloth. The Baudelaires suspected he was Ernest, as he hadn't bothered to say "Hello."

"Blindfolds?" Violet asked.

"Everyone wears blindfolds at a High Court trial," the manager replied, "except the judges, of course. Haven't you heard the expression 'Justice is blind'?"

"Yes," Klaus said, "but I always thought it meant that justice should be fair and unprejudiced."

"The verdict of the High Court was to take the expression literally," said the manager, "so everyone except the judges must cover their eyes before the trial can begin."

"Scalia," Sunny said. She meant something like, "It doesn't seem like the literal interpretation makes any sense," but her siblings did not think it was wise to translate.

"I also brought you some tea," he said, revealing a tray containing a teapot and three cups. "I thought it might fortify you for the trial."

By "fortify," the manager meant that a few sips of tea might give the children some much-needed strength for their ordeal, and the children thought it must be Frank who was doing them such a favor. "You're very kind," Violet said.

“I’m sorry there’s no sugar,” he said.

“That’s quite all right,” Klaus said, and then hurriedly flipped to a page in his commonplace book until he found his notes on the children’s conversation with Kit Snicket. “‘Tea should be bitter as wormwood,’” he read, “‘and as sharp as a two-edged sword.’”

The manager gave Klaus a small, unfathomable smile. “Drink your tea,” he said. “I’ll knock in a few minutes to bring you to trial.”

Frank, unless it was Ernest, shut the door, and left the Baudelaires alone.

“Why did you say that about the tea?” Violet asked.

“I thought he might be talking to us in code,” Klaus said. “I thought if we gave the proper reply, something might happen.”

“Unfathomable,” Sunny said.

“Everything seems unfathomable,” Violet said with a sigh, pouring tea for her siblings. “It’s getting so that I can’t tell a noble person from a wicked one.”

“Kit said that the only way to tell a villain from a volunteer is to observe everyone, and make such judgements ourselves,” Klaus said, “but that hasn’t helped us at all.”

“Today the High Court will do the judging for us,” Violet said. “Maybe they’ll prove to be helpful.”

“Or fail us,” Sunny said.

The eldest Baudelaire smiled, and reached to help her sister put on her shoes. “I wish our parents could see how much you’ve grown,” she said. “Mother always said that as soon as you learned to walk, Sunny, you’d be going places.”

“I doubt a closet in the Hotel Denouement was what she had in mind,” Klaus said, blowing on his tea to cool it.

“Who knows what they had in mind?” Violet asked. “That’s one more mystery we’ll probably never solve.”

Sunny took a sip of tea, which was indeed as bitter as wormwood and as sharp as a two-edged sword, although the youngest Baudelaire had little experience with metallic weapons or hoary aromatic plants of the composite family, used in certain recreational tonics. “Mama and Poppa,” she said hesitantly, “and poison darts?”

Her siblings did not have time to answer, as there was another knock on the door. “Finish your tea,” called either Frank or Ernest, “and put on your blindfolds. The trial is about to begin.”

The Baudelaires hurried to follow the instructions of either the volunteer or the villain, and took a few quick sips of their tea, tied their shoes, and wound the pieces of cloth around their eyes. In a moment they heard the door of Room 121 open, and heard Frank or Ernest step toward them.

“Where are you?” he asked.

“We’re right here,” Violet said. “Can’t you see us?”

“Of course not,” the manager replied. “I’m also wearing a blindfold. Reach for my hand, and I’ll lead you to the trial.”

The eldest Baudelaire reached out in front of her and found a large, rough hand awaiting hers. Klaus took Violet’s other hand, and Sunny took Klaus’s, and in this way the children were led out of Room 121. The expression “the blind leading the blind,” like the expression “Justice is blind,” is usually not taken literally, as it simply refers to a confusing situation in which the people in charge know nothing more than the people following them. But as the Baudelaires learned as they were led through the lobby, the blindfolded leading the blindfolded results in the same sort of confusion. The children could not see anything through their blindfolds, but the room was filled with the sounds of people looking for their companions, bumping up against one another, and running into the walls and furniture. Violet was poked in the eye by someone's chubby finger. Klaus was mistaken for someone named Jerry by a man who gave him an enormous hug before learning of his mistake. And someone bumped into Sunny's head, assumed she was an ornamental vase, and tried to place an umbrella in her mouth. Above the noise of the crowd, the Baudelaires heard the clock strike twelve insistent *Wrong!*s, and realized they had been sleeping quite some time. It was already Wednesday afternoon, which meant that Thursday, and the arrival of their noble friends and associates, was quite close indeed.

"Attention!" The voice of Justice Strauss was also quite close indeed, and rang out over the crowd, along with the repeated banging of a gavel, a word which refers to the small hammer used by judges when they want someone's attention. "Attention everyone! The trial is about to begin! Everyone please take your seats!"

"How can we take our seats," a man asked, "when we can't see them?"

"Feel around with your hands," Justice Strauss said. "Move to your right. Further. Further. Further. Furth—"

"Ow!"

"Not that far," the judge said. "There! Sit! Now the rest of you follow his lead!"

"How can we do what he did," asked someone else, "if we can't see him?"

"Can we peek?" asked another person.

"No peeking!" Justice Strauss said sternly. "Our system of justice isn't perfect, but it's the only one we have. I remind you that all three judges of the High Court are bare-eyed, and if you peek you will be guilty of contempt of court! 'Contempt,' by the way, is a word for finding something worthless or dishonorable."

“I know what the word ‘contempt’ means,” snarled a voice the children could not recognize.

“I defined the word for the benefit of the Baudelaires,” Justice Strauss said, and the children nodded their thanks in the direction of the judge’s voice, although all three siblings had known the meaning of “contempt” since a night long ago when Uncle Monty had taken them to the movies. “Baudelaires, take three steps to your right. Three more. One more. There! You’ve reached your bench. Please sit down.”

The Baudelaires sat down on one of the lobby’s wooden benches and listened to the footsteps of the manager as he left them alone and stumbled back into the settling crowd. Finally, it sounded as if everyone had found a seat of some kind or another, and with another few bangs of the gavel and calls for attention, the crowd quieted down and Justice Strauss began the trial.

“Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen,” she said, her voice coming from right in front of the Baudelaires, “and anyone else who happens to be in attendance. It has come to the attention of the High Court that certain wicked deeds have gone unpunished, and that this wickedness is continuing at an alarming rate. We planned to hold a trial on Thursday, but after the death of Mr. Denouement it is clear we should proceed earlier, in the interests of justice and nobility. We will hear what each witness has to say and determine once and for all who is responsible. The guilty parties will be turned over to the authorities, who are waiting outside, making sure that no one will try to escape while the trial is in progress.”

“And speaking of guilty parties,” Count Olaf added, “when the trial is over, everyone is invited to a very in cocktail party, hosted by me! Wealthy women are particularly welcome!”

“I’m hosting it,” snarled the voice of Esmé Squalor, “and fashionable men will be given a free gift.”

“All gifts are free,” said either Frank or Ernest.

“You’re out of order,” Justice Strauss said sternly, banging her gavel. “We are discussing social justice, not social engagements. Now then, will the accused parties please stand and state their names and occupations for the record?”

The Baudelaires stood up hesitantly.

“You too, Count Olaf,” Justice Strauss said firmly. The wooden bench crackled beside the Baudelaires, and they realized the notorious villain had also been sitting on the bench, and was now standing beside them.

“Name?” the judge asked.

“Count Olaf,” Count Olaf replied.

“Occupation?”

“Impresario,” he said, using a fancy word for someone who puts on theatrical spectacles.

“And are you innocent or guilty?” asked Justice Strauss.

The children thought they could hear Olaf’s filthy teeth slide against his lips as he smiled. “I’m unspeakably innocent,” he said, and murmuring spread through the crowd like a ripple on the surface of a pond.

“You may be seated,” Justice Strauss said, banging her gavel. “Children, you are next. Please state your names.”

“Violet Baudelaire,” said Violet Baudelaire.

“Klaus Baudelaire,” said Klaus Baudelaire.

“Sunny Baudelaire,” said Sunny Baudelaire.

The children heard the scratching of a pen, and realized that the judge was writing down everything that was being said. “Occupations?”

The Baudelaires did not know how to answer this question. The word “occupation,” as I’m sure you know, usually refers to a job, but the Baudelaires’ employment was sporadic, a word which here means “consisting of a great number of occupations, held for a short time and under very unusual circumstances.” The word can also refer to how one spends one’s time, but the siblings hardly liked to think of all the dreadful things that had occupied them recently. Lastly, the word “occupation” can refer to the state one is in, such as being a woman’s husband, or a child’s guardian, but the youngsters were not certain how such a term could apply to the bewildering history of their lives. The Baudelaires thought and thought, and finally each gave their answer as they saw fit.

“Volunteer,” Violet said.

“Concierge,” Klaus said.

“Child,” Sunny said.

“I object!” Olaf said beside them. “Their proper occupation is orphan, or inheritor of a large fortune!”

“Your objection is noted,” Justice Strauss said firmly. “Now then, Baudelaires, are you guilty or innocent?”

Once again, the Baudelaires hesitated before answering. Justice Strauss had not asked the children precisely what they were innocent or guilty of, and the expectant hush of the lobby did not make them want to ask the judge to clarify her question. In general, of course, the Baudelaire children believed themselves to be innocent, although they were certainly guilty, as we all are, of certain deeds that are anything but noble. But the Baudelaires were not standing in general. They were standing next to Count Olaf. It was Klaus who found the words to compare the siblings’ innocence and guilt with the innocence and guilt of a man who said he was unspeakably innocent, and after a pause the middle Baudelaire answered the judge’s question.

“We’re comparatively innocent,” he said, and a ripple went through the crowd again. The children heard the scratching of Justice Strauss’s pen again, and the sound of Geraldine Julienne's enthusiastic voice.

"I can see the headlines now!" she cried. "'EVERYBODY IS INNOCENT!' Wait until the readers of *The Daily Punctilio* see that!"

"Nobody is innocent," Justice Strauss said, banging her gavel. "At least, not yet. Now then, all those in the courtroom who have evidence they would like to submit to the court, please approach the judges and do so."

The room erupted into pandemonium, a word which here means "a crowd of blindfolded people attempting to give evidence to three judges." The Baudelaires sat on the bench and heard people stumbling over one another as they all tried to submit their research to the High Court.

"I submit these newspaper articles!" announced the voice of Geraldine Julienne.

"I submit these employment records!" announced Sir.

"I submit these environmental studies!" announced Charles.

"I submit these grade books!" announced Mr. Remora.

"I submit these blueprints of banks!" announced Mrs. Bass.

"I submit these administrative records!" announced Vice Principal Nero.

"I submit this paperwork!" announced Hal.

"I submit these financial records!" announced Mr. Poe.

"I submit these rule books!" announced Mr. Lesko.

"I submit these constitutions!" announced Mrs. Morrow.

"I submit these carnival posters!" announced Hugo.

"I submit these anatomical drawings!" announced Colette.

“I submit these books,” announced Kevin, “with both my left and right hands!”

“I submit these ruby-encrusted blank pages!” announced Esmé Squalor.

“I submit this book about how wonderful I am!” announced Carmelita Spats.

“I submit this commonplace book!” announced either Frank or Ernest.

“So do I!” announced either Ernest or Frank.

“I submit my mother!”

This last voice was the first in a parade of voices the Baudelaires could not recognize. It seemed that everyone in the lobby had something to submit to the High Court, and the Baudelaires felt as if they were in the middle of an avalanche of observations, research, and other evidence, some of which sounded exculpatory—a word which here means “likely to prove that the Baudelaires were innocent”—and some of which sounded damning, a word which made the children shudder just to think of it.

“I submit these photographs!”

“I submit these hospital records!”

“I submit these magazine articles!”

“I submit these telegrams!”

“I submit these couplets!”

“I submit these maps!”

“I submit these cookbooks!”

“I submit these scraps of paper!”

“I submit these screenplays!”

"I submit these rhyming dictionaries!"

"I submit these love letters!"

"I submit these opera synopses!"

"I submit these thesauri!"

"I submit these marriage licenses!"

"I submit these Talmudic commentaries!"

"I submit these wills and testaments!"

"I submit these auction catalogs!"

"I submit these codebooks!"

"I submit these mycological encyclopedias!"

"I submit these menus!"

"I submit these ferry schedules!"

"I submit these theatrical programs!"

"I submit these business cards!"

"I submit these memos!"

"I submit these novels!"

"I submit these cookies!"

"I submit these assorted pieces of evidence I'm unwilling to categorize!"

Finally, the Baudelaires heard a mighty *thump!* and the triumphant voice of Jerome Squalor. "I submit this comprehensive history of injustice!"

he announced, and the lobby filled with the sound of applause and of hissing, as the volunteers and villains reacted. Justice Strauss had to bang her gavel quite a few times before the crowd settled down.

“Before the High Court reviews this evidence,” the judge said, “we ask each accused person to give a statement explaining their actions. You can take as long as you want to tell your story, but you should leave out nothing important. Count Olaf, you may go first.”

The wooden bench crackled again as the villain stood up, and the Baudelaires heard Count Olaf sigh, and smelled his foul breath. “Ladies and gentlemen,” he said, “I’m so incredibly innocent that the word ‘innocent’ ought to be written on my face in capital letters. The letter I would stand for ‘I’m innocent.’ The letter N would stand for ‘nothing wrong,’ which is what I’ve done. The letter A would stand for—”

“That’s not how you spell ‘innocent,’” Justice Strauss interrupted.

“I don’t think spelling counts,” Count Olaf grumbled.

“Spelling counts,” the judge said sternly.

“Well, ‘innocence’ should be spelled O-LA-F,” Count Olaf said, “and that’s the end of my speech.”

The bench crackled as Olaf sat down.

“That’s all you have to say?” Justice Strauss asked in surprise.

“Yep,” Count Olaf said.

“I told you not to leave out anything important,” the judge reminded him.

“I’m the only important thing,” Count Olaf insisted, “and I’m very innocent. I’m sure there’s more in that enormous pile of evidence that proves me innocent than there is that proves me guilty.”

“Well, all right,” the judge said uncertainly. “Baudelaires, you may now tell us your side of the story.”

The Baudelaires stood up unsteadily, their legs trembling in nervous anticipation, but once again they did not quite know what to say.

“Go on,” Justice Strauss said kindly. “We’re listening.”

The Baudelaire orphans clasped hands. Although they had just been notified about the trial a few hours ago, the children felt as if they had been waiting forever to stand and tell their story to anyone who might listen. Although much of their story had been told to Mr. Poe, and noted in Klaus’s commonplace book, and discussed with the Quagmire triplets and other noble people they had met during their travels, they had never had the opportunity to tell their entire tale, from the dreadful day at Briny Beach when Mr. Poe gave them the terrible news about their parents, to this very afternoon, as they stood at the High Court hoping that all of the villains in their lives would at last be brought to justice. Perhaps there had never been enough time to sit and tell their story just as they wanted to tell it, or perhaps their story was so unhappy that they dared not share all of the wretched details with anyone. Or perhaps the Baudelaires had simply not encountered anyone who listened to them as well as their parents had. As the siblings stood before the High Court, they could picture the faces of their mother and father, and the expressions they wore when listening to their children. Occasionally, one of the Baudelaires would be telling their parents a story, and there would be an interruption of some kind—the ringing of the phone, or the loud noise of a siren outside, or even a remark from one of the other siblings. “Hush,” the Baudelaire parents would say to the interruption. “It’s not your day in court,” they would say, and then they would turn back to the Baudelaire who was talking, and give them a nod to indicate that the story should continue. The children stood together, as the wooden bench creaked behind them, and started to tell the story of their lives, a story they had waited their lives to tell.

“Well,” Violet said, “one afternoon my siblings and I were at Briny Beach. I was dreaming up an invention that could retrieve a rock after you skipped it into the ocean. Klaus was examining creatures in tidepools. And Sunny noticed that Mr. Poe was walking toward us.”

"Hmm," Justice Strauss said, but it wasn't a thoughtful kind of "hmm." Violet thought perhaps that the judge was saying "hmm" the way she had said "hmm" to either Frank or Ernest, as a safe answer.

"Go on," said a low, deep voice that belonged to one of the other judges. "Justice Strauss was merely being thoughtful."

"Mr. Poe told us that there had been a terrible fire," Klaus continued. "Our home was destroyed, and our parents were gone."

"Hmm," Justice Strauss said again, but it wasn't a sympathetic kind of "hmm." Klaus thought perhaps that the judge was taking a sip of tea, to fortify herself as the siblings told their story.

"Please continue," said another voice. This one was very hoarse, as if the third judge had been screaming for hours and could hardly talk. "Justice Strauss was merely being sympathetic."

"Bildungsroman," said Sunny. She meant something along the lines of, "Since that moment, our story has been a long, dreadful education in the wicked ways of the world and the mysterious secrets hidden in all of its corners," but before her siblings could translate, Justice Strauss uttered another "hmm," and this one was the strangest of all. It was not a thoughtful "hmm," nor did it sound like a safe answer, and it certainly wasn't sympathetic, or the noise someone might make while taking a sip of tea. To Sunny the "hmm" sounded like a noise she'd heard a long time ago, not long after the day on Briny Beach the children were describing. The youngest Baudelaire had heard the same noise coming from her own mouth, when she was dangling outside Count Olaf's tower room in a bird cage with a piece of tape covering her mouth. Sunny gasped, recognizing the sound just as Klaus recognized the voice of the second judge, and Violet recognized the voice of the third. Blindly, the Baudelaires reached out their hands to clutch one another in panic.

"What shall we do?" Violet whispered, as quietly as possible.

"Peek," Sunny whispered back.

“If we peek,” Klaus whispered, “we’ll be guilty of contempt of court.”

“What are you waiting for, orphans?” asked the low, deep voice.

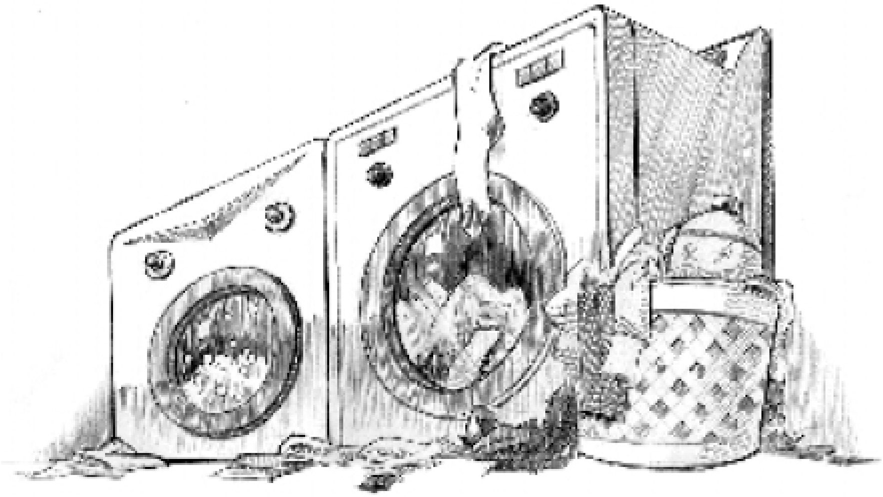
“Yes,” said the hoarse one. “Continue your story.”

But the Baudelaire orphans knew they could not continue their story, no matter how long they had been waiting to tell it. At the sound of those familiar voices, they had no choice but to remove their blindfolds. The children did not care if they were guilty of contempt of court, because they knew that if the other two judges were who they thought they were, then the High Court was indeed something they found worthless or dishonorable, and so without any further discussion they unwound the pieces of black cloth that covered their eyes, and the Baudelaire orphans peeked.

It was a shocking and upsetting peek that awaited the Baudelaires. Squinting in the sudden light, they peeked straight ahead, where the voices of Justice Strauss and the other judges had come from. The children found themselves peeking at the concierge desk, which was piled with all the evidence the crowd had submitted, including newspaper articles, employment records, environmental studies, grade books, blueprints of banks, administrative records, paperwork, financial records, rule books, constitutions, carnival posters, anatomical drawings, books, ruby-encrusted blank pages, a book alleging how wonderful Carmelita Spats was, commonplace books, photographs, hospital records, magazine articles, telegrams, couplets, maps, cookbooks, scraps of paper, screenplays, rhyming dictionaries, love letters, opera synopses, thesauri, marriage licenses, Talmudic commentaries, wills and testaments, auction catalogs, codebooks, mycological encyclopedias, menus, ferry schedules, theatrical programs, business cards, memos, novels, cookies, assorted pieces of evidence a certain person was unwilling to categorize, and someone’s mother, all of which Dewey Denouement had been hoping to catalog. Missing from the desk, however, was Justice Strauss, and as the Baudelaires peeked around the lobby, they saw that another person was missing, too, for there was no one on the wooden bench, only a few etched rings from people wicked enough to set down glasses without using coasters. Frantically, they peeked through the blindfolded crowd that was waiting impatiently for them to continue their story, and finally they spotted Count Olaf at the far side of the room. Justice Strauss was there, too, tucked in the crook of Olaf's arm the way you might carry an umbrella if both your hands were full. Neither of Count Olaf's filthy hands were full, but they were both otherwise engaged, a phrase which here means that one hand was covering Justice Strauss's mouth with tape, so she could only say "hmm," and the other was hurriedly pressing the button requesting an elevator. The harpoon gun, with its last hook gleaming wickedly, was leaning against the wall, within easy reach of the treacherous villain.

All this was a shocking and upsetting peek, of course, but even more shocking and upsetting was what the children saw when they returned their gaze to the concierge desk. For sitting at either end, with their elbows on the pile of evidence, were two villains at whom the children had hoped very much they would never get a peek again, villains of such wickedness that it is far too shocking and upsetting for me to write down their names. I can only describe them as the man with a beard, but no hair, and the woman with hair, but no beard, but to the Baudelaire orphans, these two villainous judges were another peek at the wicked way of the world.

CHAPTER
Twelve



The man with a beard but no hair stood up from the concierge desk, his knees bumping against the little bells that had sent the Baudelaire orphans on their errands. The woman with hair but no beard pointed a finger at the three children that looked as crooked as she was. The finger had been broken long ago, in a dispute over a game of backgammon, which is another story that would take at least thirteen books to describe, but in the Baudelaires' story the finger only made this brief appearance as it pointed at the children in alarm.

"The Baudelaires have taken off their blindfolds!" cried the villainous woman in her low, deep voice.

"Yes!" agreed the villainous man, in his hoarse voice. "They're guilty of contempt of court!"

"We certainly are," Violet agreed fiercely. "This court is worthless and dishonorable!"

“Two of the judges are notorious villains,” Klaus announced over the gasps of the crowd.

“Peek!” Sunny cried.

“Nobody peek!” ordered the man with a beard but no hair. “Anyone who peeks will be turned over to the authorities!”

“Take off your blindfolds!” Violet begged the crowd. “Count Olaf is kidnapping Justice Strauss this very moment!”

“Hmm!” cried Justice Strauss in agreement, from behind the tape.

“Justice Strauss is enjoying a piece of saltwater taffy!” the woman with hair but no beard said quickly. “That’s why she’s talking in hmms!”

“She’s not enjoying anything!” Klaus cried. “If there are any volunteers in the crowd, take off your blindfolds and help us!”

“The children are trying to trick you!” said the man with a beard but no hair. “Keep your blindfolds on!”

“Yes!” cried the woman with hair but no beard. “They’re trying to get all noble people arrested by the authorities!”

“Real McCoy!” Sunny yelled.

“I think the children might be telling the truth,” Jerome Squalor said hesitantly.

“Those brats are liars!” Esmé snapped. “They’re worse than my ex-boyfriend!”

“I believe them!” Charles said, scratching at his blindfold. “They’ve experienced villainy before!”

“I don’t!” Sir announced. The children could not tell if he was wearing a blindfold underneath the cloud of smoke that still hung over his head. “They’re nothing but trouble!”

“They’re telling the truth!” cried Frank, probably, unless it was Ernest.

“They’re lying!” cried Ernest, most likely, although I suppose it could have been Frank.

“They’re good students!” said Mr. Remora.

“They’re lousy administrative assistants!” said Vice Principal Nero.

“They’re bank robbers!” said Mrs. Bass, whose blindfold was covering her small, narrow mask.

“Bank robbers?” Mr. Poe asked. “Egad! Who said that?”

“They’re guilty!” cried the man with a beard but no hair, although the High Court wasn’t supposed to reach a verdict until all the evidence had been examined.

“They’re innocent!” cried Hal.

“They’re freaks!” screamed Hugo.

“They’re twisted!” shrieked Colette.

“They’re right-handed!” yelled Kevin.

“They’re headlines!” screeched Geraldine Julienne.

“They’re escaping!” said the woman with hair but no beard, and this, at least, was a true statement. Violet, Klaus, and Sunny realized that the crowd was going to do nothing that would stop Count Olaf from dragging Justice Strauss away from the trial, and that the people in the lobby would fail them, as so many noble people had failed them before. As the volunteers and villains argued around them, the children made their way quickly and stealthily away from the bench and toward Justice Strauss and Count Olaf, who was picking up the harpoon gun. If you’ve ever wanted one more cookie than people said you could have, then you know how difficult it is to move quickly and stealthily at the same time, but if you’ve had as much experience as the Baudelaires in dodging the activities of people who were shouting at you, then you know that with enough practice you can move quickly and stealthily just about anywhere, including across an enormous, domed lobby while a crowd calls for your capture.

“We must capture them!” called a voice in the crowd.

“It will take a village to capture the Baudelaires!” shrieked Mrs. Morrow. “We can’t see them through our blindfolds!”

“We don’t want to be guilty of contempt of court!” yelled Mr. Lesko. “Let’s feel our way toward the hotel entrance so they can’t escape!”

“The authorities are guarding the entrance!” the man with a beard but no hair reminded the crowd. “The Baudelaires are running toward the elevators! Capture them!”

“But don’t capture anyone else who happens to be standing near the elevators!” added the woman with hair but no beard, looking hurriedly at Olaf. The sliding doors of an elevator began to open, and the Baudelaires moved as quickly and stealthily as they could through the crowd who were reaching out blindly in all directions.

“Search the entire hotel,” said the villianous man, “and bring us anyone who you find suspicious!”

“We’ll tell you if they’re villains or not,” said the villainous woman. “After all, you can’t make such judgements yourselves!”

“*Wrong!*”

The enormous clock of the Hotel Denouement, the stuff of legend, announced one o’clock, thundering through the room of the blindfolded leading the blindfolded, just as the three siblings reached the elevators. Count Olaf had already dragged Justice Strauss inside and was hurriedly pressing the button that closes the elevator doors, but Sunny stuck out one of her feet and held them open, which is something only very brave people attempt. Olaf leaned forward to whisper threateningly at the Baudelaires.

“Let me go,” he whispered threateningly, “or I’ll announce to everyone where you are.”

Olaf, however, was not the only person who could whisper threateningly. “Let us in,” Violet whispered threateningly, “or we’ll announce to everyone where *you* are.”

“Hmm!” Justice Strauss said.

Count Olaf glared at the children, and the children glared back, until at last the villain stepped aside and let the Baudelaires join him and his prisoner in the elevator. “Going down?” he asked, and the children blinked. They had been so intent on escaping the crowd and reaching the judge that they hadn’t considered exactly where they might go afterward.

“We’re going wherever you go,” Klaus said.

“I have a few errands to run,” Olaf said. “Ha! First I’m going down to the basement, to retrieve the sugar bowl. Ha! Then I’m going up to the roof, to retrieve the Medusoid Mycelium. Ha! Then I’m going down to the lobby, to expose the fungus to everyone in the lobby. Ha! And then, finally, I’m going up to the roof, to escape without being seen by the authorities.”

“You’ll fail,” Sunny said, and Olaf glared down at the youngest Baudelaire.

“Your mother told me the same thing,” he said. “Ha! But one day, when I was seven years old—”

The elevator’s doors slid open as it arrived at the basement, and the villain interrupted himself and quickly dragged Justice Strauss out into the hallway. “Follow me!” he called back to the Baudelaires. The children, of course, did not want to follow this horrid man any more than they wanted to put cream cheese in their hair, but they looked at one another and could not think of what else they could do.

“You can’t retrieve the sugar bowl,” Violet said. “You’ll never open the Vernacularly Fastened Door.”

"Can't I?" Olaf asked, stopping at Room 025. The lock was still stretched securely across the door, as it had been when Sunny left it. "This hotel is like an enormous library," the villain said, "but you can find any item in a library if you have one thing."

"Catalog?" Sunny asked.

"No," Count Olaf replied, and pointed the harpoon gun at the judge. "A hostage." With that, he turned to Justice Strauss and ripped the tape off her mouth very slowly, so it would sting as much as possible. "You're going to help me open this lock," he informed her, with a wicked smile.

"I will do nothing of the sort!" Justice Strauss replied. "The Baudelaires will help me drag you back up to the lobby, where justice can be served!"

"Justice isn't being served in the lobby," Olaf growled, "or anywhere else in the world!"

"Don't be so sure of that!" Justice Strauss said, and reached behind her back. The Baudelaires looked hopefully at what she was holding, but their hopes fell when they saw what it was. "*Odious Lusting After Finance*," she read out loud, holding up Jerome Squalor's comprehensive history of injustice. "There's enough evidence in here to put you in jail for the rest of your life!"

"Justice Strauss," Violet said, "your fellow judges on the High Court are associates of Count Olaf. Those villains will never put Olaf in jail."

"It can't be!" Justice Strauss gasped. "I've known them for years! I've told them everything that was happening to you children, and they were always very interested!"

"Of course they were interested, you fool," Count Olaf said. "They passed along all that information to me, so I could catch up with the orphans! You've been helping me all along, without even knowing it! Ha!"

Justice Strauss leaned against an ornamental vase, and her eyes filled with tears. "I've failed you again, Baudelaires," she said. "No matter how

I’ve tried to help you, I’ve only put you in more danger. I thought justice would be served if you told the High Court your story, but—”

“No one’s interested in their story,” Count Olaf said scornfully. “Even if you wrote down every last detail, no one would read such a dreadful thing. I’ve triumphed over the orphans and over any other person foolish or noble enough to stand in my way. It’s the unraveling of my story, or, as the French say, the *noblesse oblige*.”

“*Denouement*,” Sunny corrected, but Olaf acted as though he had not heard, and turned his attention to the lock on the door.

“That idiot sub-sub said the first phrase is a description of a medical condition that all three Baudelaire children share,” he muttered, and turned to Justice Strauss. “Tell me what it is, or prepare to eat harpoon.”

“Never,” Justice Strauss said. “I may have failed these children, but I won’t fail V.F.D. You’ll never get the sugar bowl, no matter what terrible threats you make.”

“I’ll tell you what the first phrase is,” Klaus said calmly, and his siblings looked at him in astonishment. Justice Strauss looked at him in amazement. Even Count Olaf seemed a little puzzled.

“You will?” he asked.

“Certainly,” Klaus said. “It’s just like you said, Count Olaf. Every noble person has failed us. Why should we protect the sugar bowl?”

“Klaus!” Violet and Sunny cried, in simultaneous astonishment.

“No!” Justice Strauss cried, in solitary amazement.

Count Olaf looked a little puzzled again, but then shrugged his dusty shoulders. “O.K.,” he said, “tell me what medical condition you and your orphan siblings share.”

“We’re allergic to peppermints,” Klaus said, and quickly typed A-L-L-E-R-G-I-C-T-O-P-EP-P-E-R-M-I-N-T-S into the lock. Immediately, there was a muted clicking sound from the typewriter keyboard.

“It’s warming up,” Count Olaf said, in a delighted wheeze. “Get out of the way, four-eyes! The second phrase is the weapon that left me an orphan, and I can type that one in myself. P-O-Y-Z—”

“Wait!” Klaus said, before Olaf could touch the keyboard. “That can’t be right. Those letters don’t spell anything.”

“Spelling doesn’t count,” said the count.

“Yes, it does,” Klaus said. “Tell me what the weapon is that left you an orphan, and I’ll type it in for you.”

Count Olaf gave Klaus a slow smile that made the Baudelaires shudder. “Certainly I’ll tell you,” he said. “It was poison darts.”

Klaus looked at his sisters, and then in grim silence typed P-O-I-S-O-N-D-A-R-T-S into the lock, which began to buzz quietly. Count Olaf’s eyes shone brightly as he stared at the wires of the lock, which began to shake as they stretched around the hinges of the laundry room door.

“It’s working,” he said, and ran his tongue over his filthy teeth. “The sugar bowl is so close I can taste it!”

Klaus took his commonplace book from his pocket, and read his notes intently for a moment. Then he turned to Justice Strauss. “Give me that book, please,” he said, pointing to Jerome Squalor’s book. “The third phrase is the famous unfathomable question in the best-known novel by Richard Wright. Richard Wright was an American novelist of the realist school whose writings illuminated the disparities in race relations. It is likely his work is quoted in a comprehensive history of injustice.”

“You can’t read that entire book!” Count Olaf said. “The crowd will find us before you finish the first chapter!”

“I’ll look in the index,” Klaus said, “just like I did at Aunt Josephine’s, when we decoded her note and found her hiding place.”

“I always wondered how you did that,” Olaf said, sounding almost as if he admired the middle Baudelaire’s research skills. Klaus paged to the back of the book, where the index can usually be found. An index, as I’m sure you know, is a list of everything a book contains, and where each item can be found.

“Wright, Richard,” Klaus read aloud. “Unfathomable question in *Native Son*, page 581.”

“That’s the five hundred and eighty-first page,” Count Olaf explained for no one’s benefit, a phrase which here means “even though that was clear to everyone in the hallway.”

Klaus flipped hurriedly to the proper page and scanned it quickly, his eyes blinking behind his glasses. “I found it,” he said quietly. “It’s quite an interesting question, actually.”

“No one cares about interesting questions!” Olaf said. “Type it in this instant!”

Klaus smiled, and began typing furiously into the typewriter keyboard. His sisters stepped forward, and each of them put a hand on their brother’s shoulder.

“Why do this?” Sunny asked.

“Sunny’s right,” Violet said. “Why are you helping Olaf get into the laundry room?”

The middle Baudelaire typed the last word into the keyboard, which was “T-O-P-P-L-I-NG,” and then looked at his sisters. “Because the sugar bowl isn’t there,” he said, and pushed open the door.

“What do you mean?” Count Olaf demanded. “Of course the sugar bowl is in there!”

“I’m afraid Olaf is right,” Justice Strauss said. “You heard what Dewey said. When the crows were shot with the harpoon gun, they fell onto the birdpaper and dropped the sugar bowl into the funnel."

"So it would appear," Klaus said slyly.

"Enough nonsense!" Count Olaf shouted, waving his harpoon gun in the air and stomping into the laundry room. In just a few moments, however, it was clear that the middle Baudelaire had spoken the truth. The laundry room of the Hotel Denouement was very small, just large enough to hold a few washing and drying machines, some piles of dirty sheets, and a few plastic jugs of what were presumably some extremely flammable chemicals, just as Dewey had said. A metal tube hung over one corner of the ceiling, allowing steam from the machines to float up the tube and outside, but there was no sign that a sugar bowl had fallen through the funnel and dropped out the metal tube to the wooden floor of the laundry room. With a hoarse, angry roar, Count Olaf opened the doors of the washing and drying machines and slammed them closed, and then picked up the piles of dirty sheets and sent them tumbling onto the floor.

"Where is it?" he snarled, drops of spit flying from his furious mouth. "Where's the sugar bowl?"

"It's a secret," Klaus said. "A secret that died with Dewey Denouement."

Count Olaf turned to face the Baudelaire orphans, who had never seen him look this frightening. His eyes had never gleamed as brightly, and his smile had never been as peccant, a word which here means "so hungry for evil deeds as to be unhealthy." It was not unlike the face of Dewey had been as he sank into the water, as if the villain's own wickedness was causing him great pain. "He won't be the only volunteer who dies today," he said, in a terrible whisper. "I'll destroy every soul in his hotel, sugar bowl or no sugar bowl. I'll unleash the Medusoid Mycelium, and volunteers and villains alike will perish in agony. My comrades have failed me as often as my enemies, and I'm eager to be rid of them. Then I'll push that boat off the roof, and sail away with—"

"You can't push that boat off the roof," Violet said. "It would never survive the fall, due to the force of gravity."

"I suppose I'll have to add the force of gravity to my list of enemies," Olaf muttered.

"I'll get that boat off the roof," Violet said calmly, and her siblings looked at her in astonishment. Justice Strauss looked at her in amazement. Even Count Olaf seemed a little puzzled.

"You will?" he asked.

"Certainly," Violet said. "It's just like you said, Count Olaf. Every noble person has failed us. Why shouldn't we help you escape?"

"Violet!" Klaus and Sunny cried, in simultaneous astonishment.

"No!" Justice Strauss cried, in solitary amazement.

Count Olaf still looked puzzled, but gave the eldest Baudelaire a shrug. "O.K.," he said. "What do you need?"

"A few of those dirty sheets," Violet said. "I'll tie them together and make a drag chute, just like I did in the Mortmain Mountains when I stopped the caravan from falling off the mountain."

"I always wondered how you did that," Olaf said, looking at the eldest Baudelaire as if he respected her inventing skills. Violet walked into the laundry room and gathered some sheets into her arms, trying to choose the least dirty of the bunch.

"Let's go to the roof," she said quietly. Her siblings stepped forward, and each of them put a hand on their sister's shoulder.

"Why do this?" Sunny asked.

"Sunny's right," Klaus said. "Why are you helping Olaf escape?"

The eldest Baudelaire looked at the sheets in her hand, and then at her siblings. "Because he'll take us with him," she said.

"Why would I do that?" Olaf asked.

“Because you need more than a one-person crew,” Violet said slyly, “and we need to leave this hotel without being spotted by the authorities.”

“I suppose that’s true,” Olaf said. “Well, you would have ended up in my clutches in any case. Come along.”

“Not yet,” Sunny said. “One more thing.”

Everyone stared at the youngest Baudelaire, who was wearing an expression so unfathomable that even her siblings could not tell what she was thinking. “One more thing?” Count Olaf repeated, staring down at Sunny. “What could that be?”

The two eldest Baudelaires looked at their sister, and felt a cold ripple in their stomachs, as if a stone had somehow been dropped straight into the siblings. It is very difficult to make one’s way in this world without being wicked at one time or another, when the world’s way is so wicked to begin with. When unfathomable situations arose in the lives of the Baudelaires, and they did not know what to do, the children often felt as if they were balancing very delicately on top of something very fragile and very dangerous, and that if they weren’t careful they might fall a very long way into a sea of wickedness. Violet felt this delicate balance when she offered to help Count Olaf escape, even though it meant that she and her siblings could escape, too, and Klaus felt this delicate balance when he helped Olaf unlock the laundry room door, even though the sugar bowl was not to be found inside. And of course, all three Baudelaire orphans felt this delicate balance when they thought about Dewey Denouement, and that terrible instant when the weapon in their hands brought about his death. But as Sunny answered Count Olaf’s question, the clock of the Hotel Denouement struck two *Wrong!*s, and her siblings wondered if they had lost their balance at last and were tumbling away from all the noble people in the world.

“Burn down hotel,” Sunny said, and all three Baudelaire orphans felt as if they were falling.

CHAPTER
Thirteen

“Ha!” Count Olaf crowed. “This takes the cake!” He was using an expression which here means “I find this especially amusing and outrageous!” although Dewey Denouement’s underwater catalog contains a list of twenty-seven cakes that Olaf has stolen. With a look of treacherous glee he reached down and patted Sunny Baudelaire on the head, using the hand that wasn’t clutching the harpoon gun. “After all this time, the littlest orphan wants to follow in my footsteps!” he cried. “I knew I was a good guardian after all!”

“You’re not a good guardian,” Violet said, “and Sunny’s not an arsonist. My sister doesn’t know what she’s saying.”

“Burn down hotel,” Sunny insisted.

“Are you feeling all right, Sunny?” Klaus asked, peering into his sister’s eyes. He was worried that the Medusoid Mycelium, which had threatened the life of the youngest Baudelaire just days ago, was affecting her in some sinister way. Klaus had researched a way to dilute the treacherous fungus, but he wondered now if dilution was not enough.

“I feel fine,” Sunny said. “Burn down hotel.”

“That’s my girl!” Count Olaf cried. “I only wish Carmelita had your spunk! With all the errands I had to do, burning down this hotel hadn’t even occurred to me. But even when you’re very busy, you should always take time for your hobbies.”

“Your hobbies,” Justice Strauss said, “are nothing but villainy, Count Olaf. The Baudelaires may want to join you in wickedness, but I’ll do anything in my power to stop you.”

“There’s nothing in your power,” Olaf sneered. “Your fellow judges are comrades of mine, your fellow volunteers are running around the lobby of this hotel wearing blindfolds, and I have the harpoon gun.”

“I have a comprehensive history of injustice!” Justice Strauss cried. “This book should be good for something!”

The villain did not continue his argument, but merely pointed the weapon at the judge. “You orphans will start the fire here in the laundry room,” he said, “while I make sure Justice Strauss doesn’t stop us.”

“Yes, sir,” Sunny said, and reached for her siblings’ hands.

“No!” Justice Strauss cried.

“Why are you doing this, Sunny?” Violet asked her sister. “You’re going to hurt innocent people!”

“Why are you helping Count Olaf burn down this building?” Klaus cried.

Sunny looked at the laundry room, and then up at her siblings. In silence, she shook her head, as if this were not the time to discuss such matters. “Help me,” she said, and she did not have to say anything more. Although Violet and Klaus found their sister’s actions unfathomable, they followed her into the laundry room as Olaf uttered a succinct laugh of triumph.

“Ha!” Count Olaf cried. “Pay attention, orphans, and I’ll teach you some of my best tricks. First, spread those dirty sheets all over the floor. Then, take those jugs of extremely flammable chemicals and pour them all over the sheets.”

In silence, Violet spread the rest of the sheets over the laundry room’s wooden floor, while Klaus and Sunny walked over to the plastic jugs, opened them, and spilled them all over the sheets. A strong, bitter smell wafted from the laundry room as the children turned to Olaf and asked what was next.

“What is next?” Sunny asked.

“Next is a match and some kindling,” Olaf replied, and reached into his pocket with the hand that wasn’t holding the gun. “I always carry matches on my person,” he said, “just as my enemies always carry kindling.” He leaned forward and snatched *Odious Lusting After Finance* out of Justice Strauss’s hands. “This book *is* good for something,” he said, and tossed it into the center of the dirty sheets, narrowly missing the siblings as they walked into the hallway. Jerome Squalor’s book opened as it landed, and the children saw what looked like a carefully drawn diagram, with arrows and dotted lines and a paragraph of notation underneath. The Baudelaires leaned forward to see if they could read what the injustice expert had written, and caught only the word “passageway” before Olaf lit a match and tossed it expertly onto the page. The paper caught on fire at once, and the book began to burn.

“Oh,” Sunny said quietly, and leaned against her siblings. All three Baudelaires, and the adults standing with them, stared into the laundry room in silence.

The burning of a book is a sad, sad sight, for even though a book is nothing but ink and paper, it feels as if the ideas contained in the book are disappearing as the pages turn to ashes and the cover and binding—which is the term for the stitching and glue that holds the pages together—blacken and curl as the flames do their wicked work. When someone is burning a book, they are showing utter contempt for all of the thinking that produced its ideas, all of the labor that went into its words and sentences, and all of the trouble that befell the author, from the swarm of termites that tried to destroy his notes, to the large boulder that someone rolled onto the illustrator as he sat by the edge of the pond waiting for the delivery of the manuscript. Justice Strauss gazed at the book with a shocked frown, perhaps thinking of Jerome Squalor's research and all the villains it might have brought to justice. Count Olaf stared at the book with a smug smile, perhaps thinking of all of the other libraries he had destroyed. But you and I know there is no "perhaps" about what the Baudelaire orphans were thinking as they stared at the flames devouring the comprehensive history of injustice. Violet, Klaus, and Sunny were thinking of the fire that took their parents and their home and dropped them into the world to fend for themselves, a phrase which here means "go first from guardian to guardian, and then from desperate situation to desperate situation, trying to survive and solve the mysteries that hung over their heads like smoke." The Baudelaire orphans were thinking of the first fire that had come into their lives, and wondering if this one would be the last.

"We'd best get away from here," Count Olaf said, breaking the silence. "In my experience, once the flames reach the chemicals, the fire will spread very quickly. I'm afraid the cocktail party will be canceled, but if we hurry, there's still time to infect the guests of his hotel with the Medusoid Mycelium before we escape. Ha! To the elevators!"

Twirling the harpoon gun in his hands, the villain strode down the hallway, dragging the judge as he went, and the Baudelaires hurried to follow. When they reached the elevator, the children looked at a sign posted near one of the ornamental vases. The sign was identical to one posted in the lobby, and it is a sign you have probably seen yourself. IN CASE OF FIRE, it said, in fancy script, USE STAIRS. DO NOT USE ELEVATOR.

"Stairs," Sunny said, pointing at the sign.

"Ignore that," Olaf said scornfully, punching the button to summon an elevator.

"Dangerous," Sunny pointed out. "Take the stairs."

“You may have had the idea to burn down the hotel,” Count Olaf said, “but I’m still the boss, baby! We won’t get to the fungus in time if we take the stairs! We’re taking the elevator!”

“Drat,” Sunny said quietly, and frowned in thought. Violet and Klaus looked at their sister curiously, wondering why a child who didn’t mind setting a hotel on fire would be upset over something like an elevator. But then Sunny gazed up at her siblings with a sly smile, and uttered one word that made everything clear.

“Preludio,” she said, and after a moment her siblings grinned.

“*What?*” Olaf asked sharply, and punched the button over and over again, which never helps.

“What my sister means,” Violet said, “is that she appreciates the lesson on setting fires,” but that is not what the youngest Baudelaire meant at all. By “Preludio,” her siblings knew, Sunny was referring to the Hotel Preludio, and the weekend vacation the entire Baudelaire family had spent there. As Kit Snicket had mentioned, the Hotel Preludio was a lovely place, and I am happy to report that it is still standing, like a small mercy, and that its ballroom still has its famous chandeliers, which are shaped like enormous jellyfish and move up and down in time to the music that the orchestra plays, and that the bookstore in the lobby still specializes in the work of American novelists of the realist school, and the outdoor swimming pool is still as beautiful as it ever was, its reflection of the hotel windows shimmering whenever anyone dives in to swim laps. But the Baudelaire orphans were not remembering the chandeliers, or the bookstore, or even the swimming pool, where Sunny first learned to blow bubbles. They were remembering a prank their father had taught them, when he was in one of his whimsical moods, that can be played in any elevator. The prank, a word which here means “joke played on someone with whom you are sharing an elevator,” is best played at the moment when you are about to get off the elevator, and your fellow passengers are heading to a higher story. The Baudelaires’ mother had objected to their father teaching them such a prank, as she said it was undignified, but their father had pointed out it was no more undignified than doing magic tricks with dinner rolls, which their mother had done that very morning in the hotel restaurant, and she reluctantly agreed to participate in the prank. This particular moment in the Baudelaires' lives, of course, was not the best one for a prank, but Violet and Klaus saw immediately what their sister had in mind, and when the sliding doors opened and Count Olaf stomped inside the elevator, the three Baudelaires followed him and immediately pressed every single button. When the Baudelaires' father had done this after exiting the elevator, it meant that the remaining passenger, a tiresome woman named Eleanora, had been forced to visit every story on the way up to her room, but here in the Hotel Denouement, the prank served a dual purpose, a phrase which here means "enabled the Baudelaires to do two things at once."

"What are you doing?" Olaf shrieked. "I'll never reach the Medusoid Mycelium in time to poison everyone!"

"We'll be able to warn as many people as possible that the building is on fire!" cried Justice Strauss.

"Dual purpose," Sunny said, and shared a small smile with her siblings as the elevator reached the lobby and opened its doors. The enormous, domed room was nearly empty, and the Baudelaires could see that everyone had followed the advice of the two wicked judges of the High Court, and were wandering blindfolded around the hotel.

"Fire!" cried Violet immediately, knowing the doors would slide shut in an instant. "Attention everyone! There's a fire in the hotel! Please leave at once!"

The man with a beard but no hair was standing nearby, with his hand on Jerome Squalor's shoulder so he could push the injustice expert around. "Fire?" he said, in his strange, hoarse voice. "Good work, Olaf!"

"What do you mean, good work?" demanded Jerome, a frown appearing below his blindfold.

"I meant to say, 'there's Olaf!'" the man said hurriedly, pushing Jerome in the direction of the elevator. "Capture him! He needs to be brought to the authorities!"

“Olaf is here?” asked probably Frank, who was feeling his way along the wall along with his brother. “I’m going to capture him!”

“Where are the Baudelaires?” demanded probably Ernest. “I’m going to capture them!”

“In the elevator!” shouted the woman with hair but no beard from across the lobby, but the sliding doors were already closing.

“Call the fire department!” Violet cried desperately.

“Which one?” was the reply, but the children could not tell if it came from Frank or Ernest, and the doors slid shut on this one last glimpse of the villains and volunteers before elevator began its rise to the second story.

“Those judges promised that if I waited until tomorrow I’d see all my enemies destroyed,” Count Olaf grumbled, “and now they’re trying to capture me. I knew they’d fail me some day.”

The Baudelaires did not have time to point out that Olaf had also failed the judges, by planning to poison them, along with everyone else in the lobby, with the Medusoid Mycelium, because the elevator immediately stopped on the second story and opened its doors.

“There’s a fire in the hotel!” Klaus called into the hallway. “Everyone leave at once!”

“A fire?” said Esmé Squalor. The Baudelaires were surprised to see that this treacherous woman was still wearing her blindfold, but perhaps she had decided that pieces of black cloth were in. “Who said that?”

“It’s Klaus Baudelaire,” Klaus Baudelaire said. “You need to get out of the hotel!”

“Don’t listen to that cakesniffer!” cried Carmelita Spats, who was running a hand over an ornamental vase. “He’s just trying to escape from us! Let’s take off our blindfolds and peek!”

“Don’t take off your blindfolds!” cried Count Olaf. “Those Baudelaires are guilty of contempt of court, and they’re trying to trick you into joining them! There’s no fire! Whatever you do, don’t leave the hotel!”

“We’re not tricking you!” Klaus said. “Olaf is tricking you! Please believe us!”

“I don’t know who to believe,” Esmé said scornfully. “You orphans are as dishonest as my ex-boyfriend.”

“Leave us alone!” Carmelita ordered, bumping into a wall. “We can find our own way!”

The doors slid shut before the Baudelaires could argue any further, and indeed the children never argued with either unpleasant female again. In a moment, the elevator arrived at the third story, and Sunny raised her voice so that she could be heard by anyone, treacherous or noble, in the hallway.

“Fire!” she cried. “Use stairs. Do not use elevator!”

“Sunny Baudelaire?” Mr. Poe called, recognizing the child’s voice. The banker was facing the entirely wrong direction, and holding a white handkerchief up to his black blindfold. “Don’t add the false reporting of fire to your list of crimes! You’re already guilty of contempt of court, and perhaps murder!”

“It’s not false!” Justice Strauss exclaimed. “There really is a fire, Mr. Poe! Leave this hotel!”

“I can’t leave,” Mr. Poe replied, coughing into his handkerchief. “I’m still in charge of the Baudelaires’ affairs, and their parents’ fort—”

The elevator doors closed before Mr. Poe could finish his word, and the Baudelaires were taken away from the banker one last time, and with each stop of the elevator, I’m sorry to say, it was more or less the same. The Baudelaires saw Mrs. Bass on the third story, still wearing her small blond wig like a snowcap on the top of a mountain peak, and her blindfold, stretched over her small, narrow mask, and they saw Mr. Remora, who was wandering around the seventh story with Vice Principal Nero. They saw Geraldine Julienne, who was using her microphone the way some blind people use a cane, and they saw Charles and Sir, who were holding hands so as not to lose one another, and they saw Hugo and Colette and Kevin, who were holding the birdpaper Klaus had hung outside the window of the sauna, and they saw Mr. Lesko arguing with Mrs. Morrow, and they saw a man with a guitar making friends with a woman in a crow-shaped hat, and they saw many people they did not recognize, either as volunteers or as villains, who were wandering the hallways of the hotel to capture anyone they might find suspicious. Some of these people believed the Baudelaires when they told them the news of the fire, and some of these people believed Count Olaf when he told them that the Baudelaires were lying, and some of these people believed Justice Strauss when she told them that Count Olaf was lying when he said the Baudelaires were lying when they told them the news of the fire. But the elevator's stop on each story of the hotel was very brief, and the children had only a glimpse of each of these people. They heard Mrs. Bass mutter something about a getaway car, and they heard Mr. Remora wonder something about fried bananas. They heard Nero worry about his violin case, and Geraldine squeal about headlines, and they heard Charles and Sir bicker over whether or not fires were good for the lumber industry. They heard Hugo ask if the plan for the hors d'ouvres was still in operation, and they heard Colette ask about plucking the feathers off crows, and they heard Kevin complain that he didn't know whether to hold the birdpaper in his right hand or his left hand, and they heard Mr. Lesko insult Mrs. Morrow, and the bearded man sing a song to the woman with the crow-shaped hat, and they heard a man call for Bruce and a woman call for her mother and dozens of people whisper to and shout at, argue with and agree upon, angrily accuse and meekly defend, furiously compliment and kindly insult dozens of other people, both inside and outside the Hotel Denouement, whose names the Baudelaires recognized, forgot, and had never heard before. Each story had its story, and each story's story was unfathomable in the Baudelaire orphans' short journey, and many of the stories' stories are unfathomable to me, even after all these lonely years and all this lonely research. Perhaps some of these stories are clearer to you, because you have spied upon the people involved. Perhaps Mrs. Bass has changed her name and lives near you, or perhaps Mr. Remora's name is the same, and he lives far away. Perhaps Nero now works as a grocery store clerk, or Geraldine Julienne now teaches arts and crafts. Perhaps Charles and Sir are no longer partners, and you have had the occasion to study one of them as he sat across from you on a bus, or perhaps Hugo, Colette, and Kevin are still comrades, and you have followed these unfathomable people after noticing that one of them used both hands equally. Perhaps Mr. Lesko is now your neighbor, or Mrs. Morrow is now your sister, or your mother, or your aunt or wife or even your husband. Perhaps the noise you hear outside your door is a bearded man trying to climb into your window, or perhaps it is a woman in a crow-shaped hat hailing a taxi. Perhaps you have spotted the managers of the Hotel Denouement, or the judges of the High Court, or the waiters of Café Salmonella or the Anxious Clown, or perhaps you have met an expert on injustice or become one yourself. Perhaps the people in your unfathomable life, and their unfathomable stories, are clear to you as you make your way in the world, but when the elevator stopped for the last time, and the doors slid open to reveal the tilted roof of the Hotel Denouement, the Baudelaires felt as if they were balancing very delicately on a mysterious and perplexing heap of unfathomable mysteries. They did not know who would survive the fire they had helped set, and who would perish. They did not know who thought they were volunteers and who thought they were villains, or who believed they were innocent and who believed they were guilty. And they did not know if their own observations, errands, and deeds meant that they were noble, or wicked, or somewhere in between. As they stepped out of the elevator and walked across the rooftop sunbathing salon, the Baudelaire orphans felt as if their entire lives were like a book, filled with crucial information, that had been set aflame, like the comprehensive history of injustice that was now just ashes in a fire growing more enormous by the second.

“Look!” cried Count Olaf, leaning over the edge of the hotel and pointing down. The Baudelaires looked, expecting to see the enormous, calm surface of the pond reflecting the Hotel Denouement back at them like an enormous mirror. But the air was stained with patches of thick, black smoke that poured out of the basement windows as the fire began to spread, and the surface of the pond looked like a series of tiny mirrors, each broken into strange, unfathomable shapes. Here and there, among the smoke and mirrors, the children could see the tiny figures running this way and that, but could not tell if they were the authorities on the ground, or people in the hotel running to escape from the blaze.

Olaf continued to gaze downward, and the Baudelaires could not tell if he looked pleased or disappointed. “Thanks to you orphans,” he said, “it’s too late to destroy everyone with the Medusoid Mycelium, but at least we got to start a fire.”

Justice Strauss was still gazing at the smoke pouring from the windows and rising into the sky, and her expression was equally unfathomable. “Thanks to you orphans,” she said quietly to the Baudelaires, “this hotel will be destroyed by fire, but at least we stopped Olaf from releasing the fungus.”

“The fire isn’t burning very quickly,” Olaf said. “Many people will escape.”

“The fire isn’t burning slowly, either,” Justice Strauss said. “Some people won’t.”

The Baudelaire orphans looked at one another, but before anyone could say anything further, the entire building trembled, and the children had to struggle to keep their balance on the tilted roof. The shiny sunbathing mats tumbled across the salon, and the water in the swimming pool splashed against the side of the large, wooden boat, dampening the figurehead of the octopus attacking a man in a diving suit.

“The fire is weakening the structural foundations of the building,” Violet said.

“We have to get out of here,” Klaus said.

“Pronto,” Sunny said.

Without another word the Baudelaires turned from the adults and strode quickly toward the boat. Shifting the pile of sheets into one hand, Violet took off her concierge hat, reached into her pocket, and found the ribbon Kit Snicket had given her, which she used to tie up her hair. Klaus reached into his pocket and found his commonplace book, which he began to flip through. Sunny did not reach into her pocket, but she scraped her sharp teeth together thoughtfully, as she suspected they might be needed.

Violet stared critically at the boat. “I’ll attach the drag chute to the figurehead,” she said. “I should be able to tie a Devil’s Tongue knot around the helmet of the diver.” She paused for a moment. “That’s where the Medusoid Mycelium is hidden,” she said. “Count Olaf kept it there, where no one would think of looking.”

Klaus stared critically at his notes. “I’ll angle the sail to catch the wind,” he said. “Otherwise, a heavy object like this would fall straight down into the water.” He paused for a moment, too. “That’s what happened to the sugar bowl,” he said. “Dewey Denouement let everyone think it had fallen into the laundry room, so no one would find it in the pond.”

“Spatulas as oars,” Sunny said, pointing to the implements that Hugo had used to flip over the sunbathers.

“Good idea,” Violet agreed and gazed out to the gray, troubled waters of the sea. “Maybe our friends will find us. Hector should be flying this way, with Kit Snicket and the Quagmires.”

“And Fiona,” Klaus added.

“No,” Sunny said.

“What do you mean?” Violet asked, stepping carefully from the edge of the pool onto the side of the boat, where she began to climb a rope ladder up to the figurehead.

“They said they would arrive by Thursday,” Klaus said, helping Sunny climb aboard and then stepping onto the boat himself. The deck was about the size of a large mattress, big enough to hold the Baudelaires and perhaps one or two more passengers. “It’s Wednesday afternoon.”

“The fire,” Sunny said, and pointed at the smoke as it rose toward the sky.

The two older Baudelaires gasped. They had almost forgotten that Kit had told them she would be watching the skies, looking for a signal that would cancel Thursday's gathering.

"That's why you thought of lighting the fire," Violet said, hurriedly tying the sheets around the figurehead. "It's a signal."

"V.F.D. will see it," Klaus said, "and know that all their hopes have gone up in smoke."

Sunny nodded. "The last safe place," she said, "is safe no more."

It was an impressive sentence for the youngest Baudelaire, but a sad one.

"Maybe our friends will find us anyway," Violet said. "They might be the last noble people we know."

"If they're truly noble," Klaus said, "they might not want to be our friends."

Violet nodded, and her eyes filled with tears. "You're right," she admitted. "We killed a man."

"Accident," Sunny said firmly.

"And burned down a hotel," Klaus said.

"Signal," Sunny said.

"We had good reasons," Violet said, "but we still did bad things."

"We want to be noble," Klaus said, "but we've had to be treacherous."

"Noble enough," Sunny said, but the building trembled again, as if shaking its head in disagreement. Violet hung on to the figurehead and Klaus and Sunny hung on to each other as the boat bumped against the sides of the swimming pool.

“Help us!” Violet cried to the adults, who were still staring at the rising smoke. “Grab those spatulas, and push the boat to the edge of the roof!”

“Don’t boss me around!” Olaf growled, but he followed the judge to a corner of the roof where the spatulas lay, their mirrors reflecting the afternoon sun and the sky as it darkened with smoke. Each adult grabbed one spatula, and poked at the boat the way you might poke at a spider you were trying to get out of your bathtub. *Bump! Bump!* The sailboat bumped against the edge of the pool, and then jostled its way out of the pool, where it slowly slid, with a loud scraping sound, to the far edge of the roof. The Baudelaires hung on tightly as the front half of the boat kept sliding across the mirrors of the salon, until it was hanging over nothing but the smoky air. The boat tipped this way and that, in a delicate balance between the roof of the hotel and the sea below.

“Climb aboard!” Violet cried, giving her knots one last tug.

“Of course I’ll climb aboard!” Olaf announced, narrowing his eyes at the helmet of the figurehead. “I’m the captain of this boat!” He threw his spatula onto the deck, narrowly missing Klaus and Sunny, and then bounded onto the ship, making it teeter wildly on the edge of the building.

“You too, Justice Strauss!’ Klaus called, but the judge just put down her spatula and looked sadly at the children.

“No,” she said, and the children could see she was crying. “I won’t go. It’s not right.”

“What else can we do?” Sunny said, but Justice Strauss just shook her head.

“I won’t run from the scene of a crime,” she said. “You children should come with me, and we’ll explain everything to the authorities.”

“They might not believe us,” Violet said, readying the drag chute, “or there might be enemies lurking in their ranks, like the villains in the High Court.”

“Perhaps,” the judge said, “but that’s no excuse for running away.”

Count Olaf gave his former neighbor a scornful look, and then turned to the Baudelaires. “Let her burn to a crisp if she wants,” he said, “but it’s time for us to go.”

Justice Strauss took a deep breath, and then stepped forward and put her hand on the hideous wooden carving, as if she meant to drag the whole boat back onto the hotel. “There are people who say that criminal behavior is the destiny of children from a broken home,” she said, through her tears. “Don’t make this your destiny, Baudelaires.”

Klaus stood at the mast, adjusting the controls of the sail. “This boat,” he said, “is the only home we have.”

“I’ve been following you all this time,” she said, her grip tightening on the figurehead. “You’ve always been just out of my grasp, from the moment Mr. Poe took you away from the theater in his car to the moment Kit Snicket took you through the hedges in her taxi. I won’t let you go, Baudelaires!”

Sunny stepped toward the judge, and for one moment her siblings thought she was going to step off the boat. But then she merely looked into the judge’s weeping eyes, and gave her a very sad smile.

“Good-bye,” she said, and the Baudelaire opened her mouth and bit the hand of justice. With a cry of pain and frustration, Justice Strauss let go of the figurehead, and the building trembled again, sending the judge tumbling to the ground, and the boat tumbling off the roof, just as the clock of the Hotel Denouement announced the hour for the very last time.

Wrong! Wrong! Wrong! The clock struck three times, and the three Baudelaires screamed as they hurtled toward the sea, and even Count Olaf cried “Mommy!” as it seemed for a terrible moment that their luck had run out at last, and that the boat would not survive the fall, due to the force of gravity. But then Violet let go of the dirty sheets, and the drag chute billowed into the air, looking almost like another patch of smoke against the sky, and Klaus moved the sail to catch the wind, and the boat stopped falling and started to glide, the way a bird will catch the wind, and rest its wings for a few moments, particularly if it is tired from carrying something heavy and important. For a moment, the boat floated down through the air, like something in a magical story, and even in their panic and fear the Baudelaires could not help marveling at the way they were escaping. Finally, with a mighty *splash!* the boat landed in the ocean, quite a distance from the burning hotel. For another terrible moment, it felt like the boat was going to sink into the water, just as Dewey Denouement had sunk into the pond, guarding his underwater catalog and all its secrets, and leaving the woman he loved pregnant and distraught. But the sail caught the wind, and the figurehead righted itself, and Olaf picked up his spatula and handed it to Sunny.

"Start rowing," he ordered, and then began to cackle, his eyes shining bright. "You're in my clutches at last, orphans," he said. "We're all in the same boat."

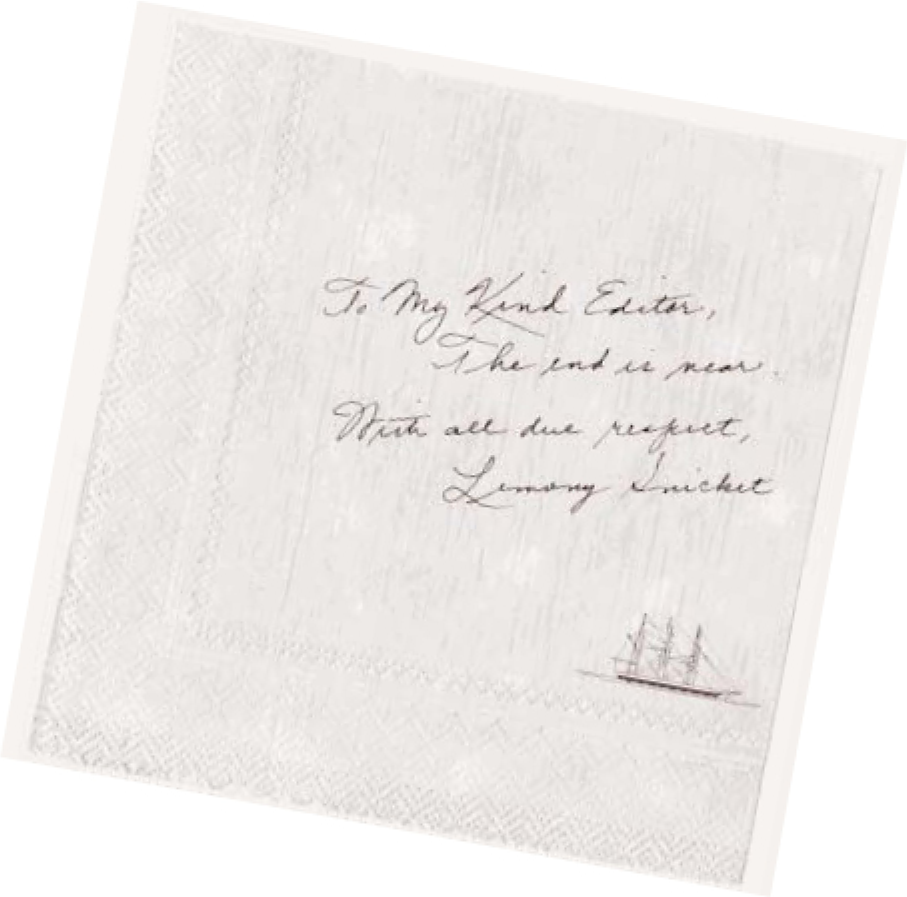
The Baudelaires looked at the villain, and then at the shore. For a moment they were tempted to jump overboard and swim back toward the city and away from Olaf. But when they looked at the smoke, pouring from the windows of the hotel, and the flames, curling around the lilies and moss that someone had grown with such care on the walls, they knew it would be just as dangerous on land. They could see the tiny figures of people standing outside the hotel, fiercely pointing toward the sea, and they saw the building tremble. It seemed that the Hotel Denouement would soon be sent toppling, and the children wanted to be far away. Dewey had promised them that they wouldn't be at sea anymore, but at this moment the sea, for the Baudelaires, was the last safe place.

Richard Wright, an American novelist of the realist school, asks a famous unfathomable question in his best-known novel, *Native Son*. "Who knows when some slight shock," he asks, "disturbing the delicate balance between social order and thirsty aspiration, shall send the skyscrapers in our cities toppling?" It is a difficult question to read, almost as if it is in some sort of code, but after much research I have been able to make some sense of its mysterious words. "Social order," for instance, is a phrase which may refer to the systems people use to organize their lives, such as the Dewey

Decimal System, or the blindfolded procedures of the High Court. And "thirsty aspiration" is a phrase which may refer to things people want, such as the Baudelaire fortune, or the sugar bowl, or a safe place that lonely and exhausted orphans can call home. So when Mr. Wright asks his question, he might be wondering if a small event, such as a stone dropping into a pond, can cause ripples in the systems of the world, and tremble the things that people want, until all this rippling and trembling brings down something enormous, such as a building.

The Baudelaires, of course, did not have a copy of *Native Son* on the wooden boat that served as their new home, but as they gazed across the water at the Hotel Denouement, they were asking themselves a question not unlike Mr. Wright's. Violet, Klaus, and Sunny wondered about all the things, large and small, that they had done. They wondered about their observations as flaneurs, which left so many mysteries unsolved. They wondered about all their errands as concierges, which brought about so much trouble. And they wondered if they were still the noble volunteers they wanted to be, or if, as the fire made its wicked way through the hotel, and the building threatened to topple, it was their destiny to become something else. The Baudelaire orphans stood in the same boat as Count Olaf, the notorious villain, and looked out at the sea, where they hoped they could find their noble friends, and wondered what else they could do, and who they might become.

TO MY KIND EDITOR



To My Kind Editor,
The end is near.
With all due respect,
Lemony Snicket

A Series of Unfortunate Events

THE BAD BEGINNING

THE REPTILE ROOM

THE WIDE WINDOW

THE MISERABLE MILL

THE AUSTERE ACADEMY

THE ERSATZ ELEVATOR

THE VILE VILLAGE

THE HOSTILE HOSPITAL

THE CARNIVOROUS CARNIVAL

THE SLIPPERY SLOPE

THE GRIM GROTTO

THE PENULTIMATE PERIL

Credits

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The Penultimate Peril

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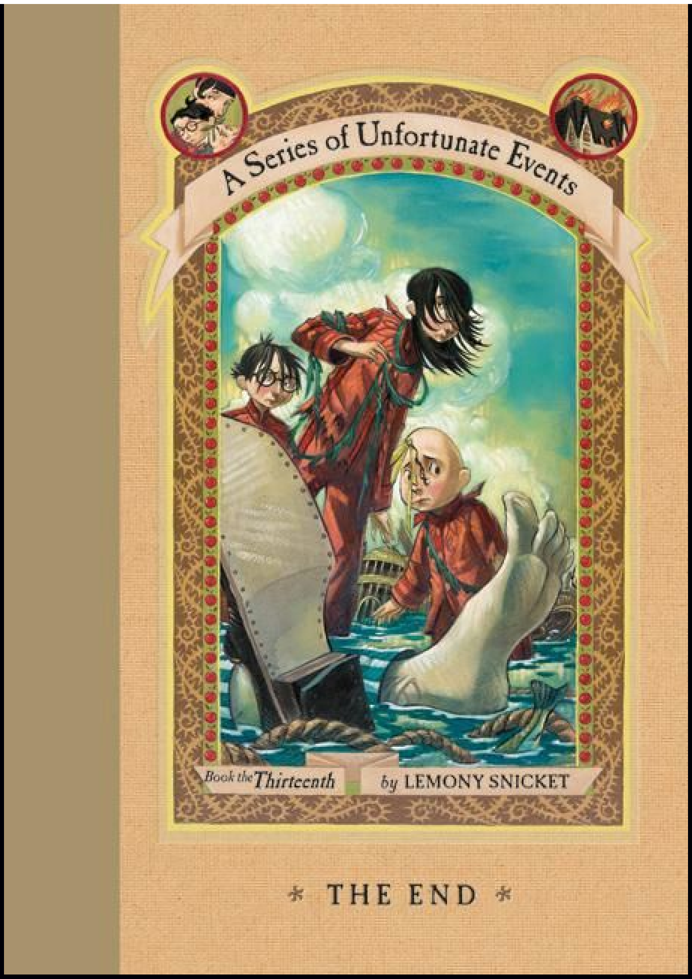
A Series of Unfortunate Events
Book the Thirteenth
by LEMONY SNICKET
THE END

A Series of Unfortunate Events

BOOK the Thirteenth

THE END

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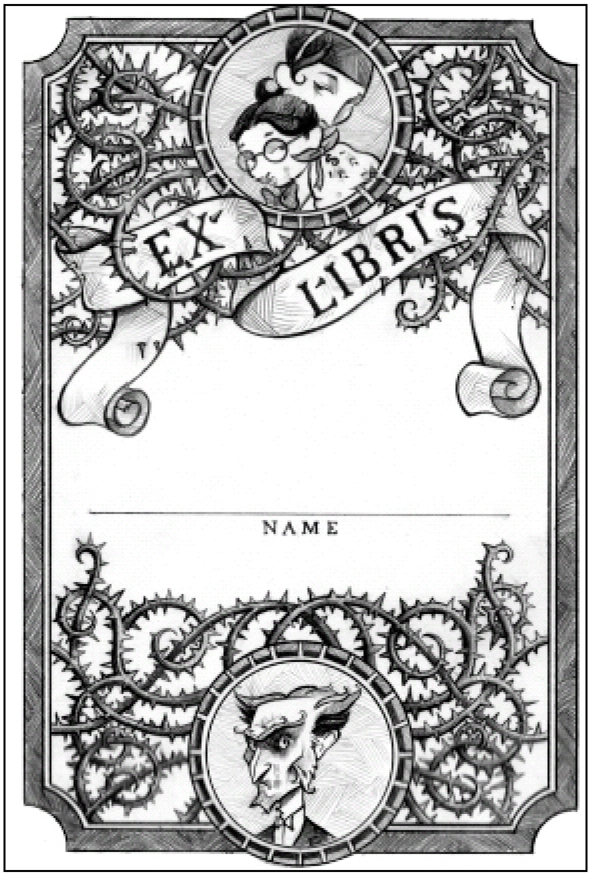

EX LIBRIS
NAME

Dear Reader,

You are presumably looking at the back of this book, or the end of THE END . The end of THE END is the best place to begin THE END, because if you read THE END from the beginning of the beginning of THE END to the end of the end of THE END, you will arrive at the end of the end of your rope.

This book is the last in A Series of Unfortunate Events, and even if you braved the previous twelve volumes, you probably can�t stand such unpleasantries as a fearsome storm, a suspicious beverage, a herd of wild sheep, an enormous bird cage, and a truly haunting secret about the Baudelaire parents.

It has been my solemn occupation to complete the history of the Baudelaire orphans, and at last I am finished. You likely have some other occupation, so if I were you I would drop this book at once, so THE END does not finish you.

With all due respect,

Lemony Snicket

Lemony Snicket

For Beatrice—

I cherished, you perished,

The world’s been nightmarished.

CHAPTER
One

If you have ever peeled an onion, then you know that the first thin, papery layer reveals another thin, papery layer, and that layer reveals another, and another, and before you know it you have hundreds of layers all over the kitchen table and thousands of tears in your eyes, sorry that you ever started peeling in the first place and wishing that you had left the onion alone to wither away on the shelf of the pantry while you went on with your life, even if that meant never again enjoying the complicated and overwhelming taste of this strange and bitter vegetable.

In this way, the story of the Baudelaire orphans is like an onion, and if you insist on reading each and every thin, papery layer in A Series of Unfortunate Events, your only reward will be 170 chapters of misery in your library and countless tears in your eyes. Even if you have read the first twelve volumes of the Baudelaires' story, it is not too late to stop peeling away the layers, and to put this book back on the shelf to wither away while you read something less complicated and overwhelming. The end of this unhappy chronicle is like its bad beginning, as each misfortune only reveals another, and another, and another, and only those with the stomach for this strange and bitter tale should venture any farther into the Baudelaire onion. I'm sorry to tell you this, but that is how the story goes.

The Baudelaire orphans would have been happy to see an onion, had one come bobbing along as they traveled across the vast and empty sea in a boat the size of a large bed but not nearly as comfortable. Had such a vegetable appeared, Violet, the eldest Baudelaire, would have tied up her hair in a ribbon to keep it out of her eyes, and in moments would have invented a device to retrieve the onion from the water. Klaus, the middle sibling and the only boy, would have remembered useful facts from one of the thousands of books he had read, and been able to identify which type of onion it was, and whether or not it was edible. And Sunny, who was just scarcely out of babyhood, would have sliced the onion into bite-sized pieces with her unusually sharp teeth, and put her newly developed cooking skills to good use in order to turn a simple onion into something quite tasty indeed. The elder Baudelaires could imagine their sister announcing “Soubise!” which was her way of saying “Dinner is served.”

But the three children had not seen an onion. Indeed, they had not seen much of anything during their ocean voyage, which had begun when the Baudelaires had pushed the large, wooden boat off the roof of the Hotel Denouement in order to escape from the fire engulfing the hotel, as well as the authorities who wanted to arrest the children for arson and murder. The wind and tides had quickly pushed the boat away from the burning hotel, and by sunset the hotel and all the other buildings in the city were a distant, faraway blur. Now, the following morning, the only things the Baudelaires had seen were the quiet, still surface of the sea and the gray gloom of the sky. The weather reminded them of the day at Briny Beach when the Baudelaires had learned of the loss of their parents and their home in a terrible fire, and the children spent much of their time in silence, thinking about that dreadful day and all of the dreadful days that had followed. It almost would have been peaceful to sit in a drifting boat and think about their lives, had it not been for the Baudelaires’ unpleasant companion.

Their companion’s name was Count Olaf, and it had been the Baudelaire orphans’ misfortune to be in this dreadful man’s company since they had become orphans and he had become their guardian. Olaf had hatched scheme after scheme in an attempt to get his filthy hands on the enormous fortune the Baudelaire parents had left behind, and although each scheme had failed, it appeared as if some of the villain’s wickedness had rubbed off on the children, and now Olaf and the Baudelaires were all in the same boat. Both the children and the count were responsible for a number of treacherous crimes, although at least the Baudelaire orphans had the decency to feel terrible about this, whereas all Count Olaf had been doing for the past few days was bragging about it.

“I’ve triumphed!” Count Olaf reiterated, a word which here means “announced for the umpteenth time.” He stood proudly at the front of the boat, leaning against a carving of an octopus attacking a man in a diving suit that served as the boat’s figurehead. “You orphans thought you could escape me, but at last you’re in my clutches!”

“Yes, Olaf,” Violet agreed wearily. The eldest Baudelaire did not bother to point out that as they were all alone in the middle of the ocean, it was just as accurate to say that Olaf was in the Baudelaires’ clutches as it was to say they were in his. Sighing, she gazed up at the tall mast of the boat, where a tattered sail drooped limply in the still air. For some time, Violet had been trying to invent a way for the boat to move even when there wasn’t any wind, but the only mechanical materials on board were a pair of enormous spatulas from the Hotel Denouement’s rooftop sunbathing salon. The children had been using these spatulas as oars, but rowing a boat is very hard work, particularly if one’s traveling companions are too busy bragging to help out, and Violet was trying to think of a way they might move the boat faster.

“I’ve burned down the Hotel Denouement,” Olaf cried, gesturing dramatically, “and destroyed V.F.D. once and for all!”

“So you keep telling us,” Klaus muttered, without looking up from his commonplace book. For quite some time, Klaus had been writing down the details of the Baudelaires’ situation in this dark blue notebook, including the fact that it was the Baudelaires, not Olaf, who had burned down the Hotel Denouement. V.F.D. was a secret organization that the Baudelaires had heard about during their travels, and as far as the middle Baudelaire knew it had not been destroyed—not quite—although quite a few V.F.D. agents had been in the hotel when it caught fire. At the moment, Klaus was examining his notes on V.F.D. and the schism, which was an enormous fight involving all of its members and had something to do with a sugar bowl. The middle Baudelaire did not know what the sugar bowl contained, nor did he know the precise whereabouts of one of the organization’s bravest agents, a woman named Kit Snicket. The children had met Kit only once before she headed out to sea herself, planning to meet up with the Quagmire triplets, three friends the Baudelaires had not seen in quite some time who were traveling in a self-sustaining hot air mobile home. Klaus was hoping the notes in his commonplace book would help him figure out exactly where they might be, if he studied them long enough.

“And the Baudelaire fortune is finally mine!” Olaf cackled. “Finally, I am a very wealthy man, which means everybody must do what I say!”

“Beans,” Sunny said. The youngest Baudelaire was no longer a baby, but she still talked in a somewhat unusual way, and by “beans” she meant something like, “Count Olaf is spouting pure nonsense,” as the Baudelaire fortune was not to be found in the large, wooden boat, and so could not be said to belong to anyone. But when Sunny said “beans,” she also meant “beans.” One of the few things the children had found on board the boat was a large clay jar with a rubber seal, which had been wedged underneath one of the boat’s wooden benches. The jar was quite dusty and looked very old, but the seal was intact, a word which here means “not broken, so the food stored inside was still edible.” Sunny was grateful for the jar, as there was no other food to be found on board, but she couldn’t help wishing that it had contained something other than plain white beans. It is possible to cook a number of delicious dishes with white beans—the Baudelaire parents used to make a cold salad of white beans, cherry tomatoes, and fresh basil, all mixed together with lime juice, olive oil, and cayenne pepper, which was a delicious thing to eat on hot days—but without any other ingredients, Sunny had only been able to serve her boat mates handfuls of a bland, white mush, enough to keep them alive, but certainly nothing in which a young chef like herself could take pride. As Count Olaf continued to brag, the youngest Baudelaire was peering into the jar, wondering how she could make something more interesting out of white beans and nothing else.

“I think the first thing I’ll buy for myself is a shiny new car!” Count Olaf said. “Something with a powerful engine, so I can drive faster than the legal limit, and an extra-thick bumper, so I can ram into people without getting all scratched up! I’ll name the car Count Olaf, after myself, and whenever people hear the squeal of brakes they’ll say, ‘Here comes Count Olaf!’ Orphans, head for the nearest luxury car dealership!”

The Baudelaires looked at one another. As I'm sure you know, it is unlikely for a car dealership to be found in the middle of the ocean, although I have heard of a rickshaw salesman who does business in a grotto hidden deep in the Caspian Sea. It is very tiresome to travel with someone who is constantly making demands, particularly if the demands are for utterly impossible things, and the children found that they could no longer hold their tongues, a phrase which here means "keep from confronting Olaf about his foolishness."

"We can't head for a car dealership," Violet said. "We can't head anywhere. The wind has died out, and Klaus and I are exhausted from rowing."

"Laziness is no excuse," Olaf growled. "I'm exhausted from all my schemes, but you don't see me complaining."

"Furthermore," Klaus said, "we have no idea where we are, and so we have no idea which direction to go in."

"I know where we are," Olaf sneered. "We're in the middle of the ocean."

"Beans," Sunny said.

"I've had enough of your tasteless mush!" Olaf snarled. "It's worse than that salad your parents used to make! All in all, you orphans are the worst henchmen I've ever acquired!"

"We're not your henchmen!" Violet cried. "We simply happen to be traveling together!"

"I think you're forgetting who the captain is around here," Count Olaf said, and knocked one dirty knuckle against the boat's figurehead. With his other hand, he twirled his harpoon gun, a terrible weapon that had one last sharp harpoon available for his treacherous use. "If you don't do what I say, I'll break open this helmet and you'll be doomed."

The Baudelaires looked at the figurehead in dismay. Inside the helmet were a few spores of the Medusoid Mycelium, a terrible fungus that could poison anyone who breathed it in. Sunny would have perished from the mushroom's deadly power not so long ago, had the Baudelaires not managed to find a helping of wasabi, a Japanese condiment that diluted the poison.

"You wouldn't dare release the Medusoid Mycelium," Klaus said, hoping he sounded more certain than he felt. "You'd be poisoned as quickly as we would."

"Equivalent flotilla," Sunny said sternly to the villain.

"Our sister's right," Violet said. "We're in the same boat, Olaf. The wind has died down, we have no idea which way to go, and we're running low on nourishment. In fact, without a destination, a way of navigating, and some fresh water, we're likely to perish in a matter of days. You might try to help us, instead of ordering us around."

Count Olaf glared at the eldest Baudelaire, and then stalked to the far end of the boat. "You three figure out a way to get us out of here," he said, "and I'll work on changing the nameplate of the boat. I don't want my yacht called *Carmelita* anymore."

The Baudelaires peered over the edge of the boat, and noticed for the first time a nameplate attached to the rear of the boat with thick tape. On the nameplate, written in a messy scrawl, was the word "Carmelita," presumably referring to Carmelita Spats, a nasty young girl whom the Baudelaires had first encountered at a dreadful school they were forced to attend, and who later had been more or less adopted by Count Olaf and his girlfriend Esmé Squalor, whom the villain had abandoned at the hotel. Putting down the harpoon gun, Count Olaf began to pick at the tape with his dirt-encrusted fingernails, peeling away at the nameplate to reveal another name underneath. Although the Baudelaire orphans did not care about the name of the boat they now called home, they were grateful that the villain had found something to do with his time so they could spend a few minutes talking among themselves.

“What can we do?” Violet whispered to her siblings. “Do you think you can catch some fish for us to eat, Sunny?”

The youngest Baudelaire shook her head. “No bait,” she said, “and no net. Deep-sea dive?”

“I don’t think so,” Klaus said. “You shouldn’t be swimming down there without the proper equipment. There are all sorts of sinister things you could encounter.”

The Baudelaires shivered, thinking of something they had encountered while on board a submarine called the *Queequeg*. All the children had seen was a curvy shape on a radar screen that resembled a question mark, but the captain of the submarine had told them that it was something even worse than Olaf himself. “Klaus is right,” Violet said. “You shouldn’t swim down there. Klaus, is there anything in your notes that might lead us to the others?”

Klaus shut his commonplace book and shook his head. “I’m afraid not,” he said. “Kit told us she was going to contact Captain Widdershins and meet him at a certain clump of seaweed, but even if we knew exactly which clump she meant, we wouldn’t know how to get there without proper navigation equipment.”

“I could probably make a compass,” Violet said. “All I need is a small piece of magnetized metal and a simple pivot. But maybe we shouldn’t join the other volunteers. After all, we’ve caused them a great deal of trouble.”

“That’s true,” Klaus admitted. “They might not be happy to see us, particularly if we had Count Olaf along.”

Sunny looked at the villain, who was still scraping away at the nameplate. “Unless,” she said.

Violet and Klaus shared a nervous glance. “Unless what?” Violet asked.

Sunny was silent for a moment, and looked down at the concierge uniform she was still wearing from her time at the hotel. “Push Olaf overboard," she whispered.

The elder Baudelaires gasped, not just because of what Sunny had said but because they could easily picture the treacherous act Sunny had described. With Count Olaf overboard, the Baudelaires could sail someplace without the villain's interference, or his threats to release the Medusoid Mycelium. There would be one fewer person with whom to share the remaining beans, and if they ever reached Kit Snicket and the Quagmires they wouldn't have Olaf along. In uneasy silence they turned their gazes to the back of the boat, where Olaf was leaning over to peel off the nameplate. All three Baudelaires could imagine how simple it would be to push him, just hard enough for the villain to lose his balance and topple into the water.

"Olaf wouldn't hesitate to throw *us* overboard," Violet said, so quietly her siblings could scarcely hear her. "If he didn't need us to sail the boat, he'd toss us into the sea."

"V.F.D. might not hesitate, either," Klaus said.

"Parents?" Sunny asked.

The Baudelaires shared another uneasy glance. The children had recently learned another mysterious fact about their parents and their shadowy past—a rumor concerning their parents and a box of poison darts. Violet, Klaus, and Sunny, like all children, had always wanted to believe the best about their parents, but as time went on they were less and less sure. What the siblings needed was a compass, but not the sort of compass Violet had mentioned. The eldest Baudelaire was talking about a navigational compass, which is a device that allows a person to tell you the proper direction to travel in the ocean. But the Baudelaires needed a moral compass, which is something inside a person, in the brain or perhaps in the heart, that tells you the proper thing to do in a given situation. A navigational compass, as any good inventor knows, is made from a small piece of magnetized metal and a simple pivot, but the ingredients in a moral compass are not as clear. Some believe that everyone is born with a moral compass already inside them, like an appendix, or a fear of worms. Others believe that a moral compass develops over time, as a person learns about the decisions of others by observing the world and reading books. In any case, a moral compass appears to be a delicate device, and as people grow older and venture out into the world, it often becomes more and more difficult to figure out which direction one's moral compass is pointing, so it is harder and harder to figure out the proper thing to do. When the Baudelaires first encountered Count Olaf, their moral compasses never would have told them to get rid of this terrible man, whether by pushing him out of his mysterious tower room or running him over with his long, black automobile. But now, standing on the *Carmelita*, the Baudelaire orphans were not sure what they should do with this villain who was leaning so far over the boat that one small push would have sent him to his watery grave.

But as it happened, Violet, Klaus, and Sunny did not have to make this decision, because at that instant, as with so many instants in the Baudelaire lives, the decision was made for them, as Count Olaf straightened up and gave the children a triumphant grin. "I'm a genius!" he announced. "I've solved all of our problems! Look!"

The villain gestured behind him with one thick thumb, and the Baudelaires peered over the edge of the boat and saw that the CARMELITA nameplate had been removed, revealing a nameplate reading COUNT OLAF, although this nameplate, too, was attached with tape, and it appeared that yet another nameplate was underneath this one. "Renaming the boat doesn't solve any of our problems," Violet said wearily.

"Violet is right," Klaus said. "We still need a destination, a way of navigating, and some kind of nourishment."

"Unless," Sunny said, but Count Olaf interrupted the youngest Baudelaire with a sly chuckle.

"You three are really quite slow-witted," the villain said. "Look at the horizon, you fools, and see what is approaching! We don't need a destination or a way of navigating, because we'll go wherever it takes us! And we're about to get more fresh water than we could drink in a lifetime!"

The Baudelaires looked out at the sea, and saw what Olaf was talking about. Spilling across the sky, like ink staining a precious document, was an immense bank of black clouds. In the middle of the ocean, a fierce storm can arrive out of nowhere, and this storm promised to be very fierce indeed—much fiercer than Hurricane Herman, which had menaced the Baudelaires some time ago during a voyage across Lake Lachrymose that ended in tragedy. Already the children could see the thin, sharp lines of rain falling some distance away, and here and there the clouds flickered with furious lightning.

“Isn’t it wonderful?” Count Olaf asked, his scraggly hair already fluttering in the approaching wind. Over the villain’s nefarious chuckle the children could hear the sound of approaching thunder. “A storm like this is the answer to all your whining.”

“It might destroy the boat,” Violet said, looking nervously up at the tattered sails. “A boat of this size is not designed to withstand a heavy storm.”

“We have no idea where it will take us,” Klaus said. “We could end up even further from civilization.”

“All overboard,” Sunny said.

Count Olaf looked out at the horizon again, and smiled at the storm as if it were an old friend coming to visit. “Yes, those things might happen,” he said with a wicked smile. “But what are you going to do about it, orphans?”

The Baudelaires followed the villain’s gaze to the storm. It was difficult to believe that just moments ago the horizon had been empty, and now this great black mass of rain and wind was staining the sky as it drew closer and closer. Violet, Klaus, and Sunny could do nothing about it. An inventing mind, the notes of a researcher, and surprisingly adept cooking skills were no match for what was coming. The storm clouds unfurled wider and wider, like the layers of an onion unpeeling, or a sinister secret becoming more and more mysterious. Whatever their moral compass told them about the proper thing to do, the Baudelaire orphans knew there was only one choice in this situation, and that was to do nothing as the storm engulfed the children and the villain as they stood together in the same boat.

CHAPTER
Two

It is useless for me to describe to you how terrible Violet, Klaus, and even Sunny felt in the hours that followed. Most people who have survived a storm at sea are so shaken by the experience that they never want to speak of it again, and so if a writer wishes to describe a storm at sea, his only method of research is to stand on a large, wooden boat with a notebook and pen, ready to take notes should a storm suddenly strike. But I have already stood on a large, wooden boat with a notebook and pen, ready to take notes should a storm suddenly strike, and by the time the storm cleared I was so shaken by the experience that I never wanted to speak of it again. So it is useless for me to describe the force of the wind that tore through the sails as if they were paper, and sent the boat spinning like an ice-skater showing off. It is impossible for me to convey the volume of rain that fell, drenching the Baudelaires in freezing water so their concierge uniforms clung to them like an extra layer of soaked and icy skin. It is futile for me to portray the streaks of lightning that clattered down from the swirling clouds, striking the mast of the boat and sending it toppling into the churning sea. It is inadequate for me to report on the deafening thunder that rang in the Baudelaires' ears, and it is superfluous for me to recount how the boat began to tilt back and forth, sending all of its contents tumbling into the ocean: first the jar of beans, hitting the surface of the water with a loud *glop!*, and then the spatulas, the lightning reflecting off their mirrored surfaces as they disappeared into the swirling tides, and lastly the sheets Violet had taken from the hotel laundry room and fashioned into a drag chute so the boat would survive its drop from the rooftop sunbathing salon, billowing in the stormy air like jellyfish before sinking into the sea. It is worthless for me to specify the increasing size of the waves rising out of water, first like shark fins, and then like tents, and then finally like glaciers, their icy peaks climbing higher and higher until they finally came crashing down on the soaked and crippled boat with an unearthly roar like the laughter of some terrible beast. It is bootless for me to render an account of the Baudelaire orphans clinging to one another in fear and desperation, certain that at any moment they would be dragged away and tossed to their watery graves, while Count Olaf clung to the harpoon gun and the wooden figurehead, as if a terrible weapon and a deadly fungus were the only things he loved in the world, and it is of no earthly use to provide a report on the front of the figurehead detaching from the boat with a deafening crackle, sending the Baudelaires spinning in one direction and Olaf spinning in the other, or the sudden jolt as the rest of the boat abruptly stopped spinning, and a horrible scraping sound came from beneath the shuddering wood floor of the craft, as if a gigantic hand were grabbing the remains of the *Count Olaf* from below, and holding the trembling siblings in its strong and steady grip. Certainly the Baudelaires did not find it necessary to wonder what had happened now, after all those terrible, whirling hours in the heart of the storm, but simply crawled together to a far corner of the boat, and huddled against one another, too stunned to cry, as they listened to the sea rage around them, and heard the frantic cries of Count Olaf, wondering if he were being torn limb from limb by the furious storm, or if he, too, had found some strange safety, and not knowing which fate they wished upon the man who had flung so much misfortune on the three of them. There is no need for me to describe this storm, as it would only be another layer of this unfortunate onion of a story, and in any case by the time the sun rose the next morning, the swirling black clouds were already scurrying away from the bedraggled Baudelaires, and the air was silent and still, as if the whole evening had only been a ghastly nightmare.

The children stood up unsteadily in their piece of the boat, their limbs aching from clinging to one another all night, and tried to figure out where in the world they were, and how in the world they had survived. But as they gazed around at their surroundings, they could not answer these questions, as they had never seen anything in the world like the sight that awaited them.

At first, it appeared that the Baudelaire orphans were still in the middle of the ocean, as all the children could see was a flat and wet landscape stretching out in all directions, fading into the gray morning mist. But as they peered over the side of their ruined boat, the children saw that the water was not much deeper than a puddle, and this enormous puddle was littered with detritus, a word which here means “all sorts of strange items.” There were large pieces of wood sticking out of the water like jagged teeth, and long lengths of rope tangled into damp and complicated knots. There were great heaps of seaweed, and thousands of fish wriggling and gaping at the sun as seabirds swooped down from the misty sky and helped themselves to a seafood breakfast. There were what looked like pieces of other boats—anchors and portholes, railings and masts, scattered every which way like broken toys—and other objects that might have been from the boats’ cargo, including shattered lanterns, smashed barrels, soaked documents, and the ripped remains of all sorts of clothing, from top hats to roller skates. There was an old-fashioned typewriter leaning against a large, ornate bird cage, with a family of guppies wriggling through its keys. There was a large, brass cannon, with a large crab clawing its way out of the barrel, and there was a hopelessly torn net caught in the blades of a propeller. It was as if the storm had swept away the entire sea, leaving all of its contents scattered on the ocean floor.

“What is this place?” Violet said, in a hushed whisper. “What happened?”

Klaus took his glasses out of his pocket, where he had put them for safekeeping, and was relieved to see they were unharmed. “I think we’re on a coastal shelf,” he said. “There are places in the sea where the water is suddenly very shallow, usually near land. The storm must have thrown our boat onto the shelf, along with all this other wreckage.”

“Land?” Sunny asked, holding her tiny hand over her eyes so she might see farther. “Don’t see.”

Klaus stepped carefully over the side of the boat. The dark water only came up to his knees, and he began to walk around the boat in careful strides. “Coastal shelves are usually much smaller than this,” he said, “but there must be an island somewhere close by. Let’s look for it.”

Violet followed her brother out of the boat, carrying her sister, who was still quite short. “Which direction do you think we should go?” she asked. “We don’t want to get lost.”

Sunny gave her siblings a small smile. “Already lost,” she pointed out.

“Sunny’s right,” Klaus said. “Even if we had a compass, we don’t know where we are or where we are going. We might as well head in any direction at all.”

“Then I vote we head west,” Violet said, pointing in the opposite direction of the rising sun. “If we’re going to be walking for a while, we don’t want the sun in our eyes.”

“Unless we find our concierge sunglasses,” Klaus said. “The storm blew them away, but they might have landed on the same shelf.”

“We could find anything here,” Violet said, and the Baudelaires had walked only a few steps before they saw this was so, for floating in the water was one piece of detritus they wished had blown away from them forever. Floating in a particularly filthy part of the water, stretched out flat on his back with his harpoon gun leaning across one shoulder, was Count Olaf. The villain’s eyes were closed underneath his one eyebrow, and he did not move. In all their miserable times with the count, the Baudelaires had never seen Olaf look so calm.

“I guess we didn’t need to throw him overboard,” Violet said. “The storm did it for us.”

Klaus leaned down to peer closer to Olaf, but the villain still did not stir. “It must have been terrible,” he said, “to try and ride out the storm with no kind of shelter whatsoever.”

“Kikbucit?” Sunny asked, but at that moment Count Olaf’s eyes opened and the youngest Baudelaire’s question was answered. Frowning, the villain moved his eyes in one direction and then the other.

“Where am I?” he muttered, spitting a piece of seaweed out of his mouth. “Where’s my figurehead?”

“Coastal shelf,” Sunny replied.

At the sound of Sunny’s voice, Count Olaf blinked and sat up, glaring at the children and shaking water out of his ears. “Get me some coffee, orphans!” he ordered. “I had a very unpleasant evening, and I’d like a nice, hearty breakfast before deciding what to do with you.”

“There’s no coffee here,” Violet said, although there was in fact an espresso machine about twenty feet away. “We’re walking west, in the hopes of finding an island.”

“You’ll walk where I tell you to walk,” Olaf growled. “Are you forgetting that I’m the captain of this boat?”

“The boat is stuck in the sand,” Klaus said. “It’s quite damaged.”

“Well, you’re still my henchpeople,” the villain said, “and my orders are that we walk west, in the hopes of finding an island. I’ve heard about islands in the distant parts of the sea. The primitive inhabitants have never seen civilized people, so they will probably revere me as a god.”

The Baudelaires looked at one another and sighed. “Revere” is a word which here means “praise highly, and have a great deal of respect for,” and there was no person the children revered less than the dreadful man who was standing before them, picking his teeth with a bit of seashell and referring to people who lived in a certain region of the world as “primitive.” Yet it seemed that no matter where the Baudelaires traveled, there were people either so greedy that they respected and praised Olaf for his evil ways, or so foolish that they didn’t notice how dreadful he really was. It was enough to make the children want to abandon Olaf there on the coastal shelf, but it is difficult to abandon someone in a place where everything is already abandoned, and so the three orphans and the one villain trudged together westward across the cluttered coastal shelf in silence, wondering what was in store for them. Count Olaf led the way, balancing the harpoon gun on one shoulder, and interrupting the silence every so often to demand coffee, fresh juice, and other equally unobtainable breakfast items. Violet walked behind him, using a broken banister she found as a walking stick and poking at interesting mechanical scraps she found in the muck, and Klaus walked alongside his sister, jotting the occasional note in his commonplace book. Sunny climbed on top of Violet's shoulders to serve as a sort of lookout, and it was the youngest Baudelaire who broke the silence with a triumphant cry.

"Land ho!" she cried, pointing into the mist, and the three Baudelaires could see the faint shape of an island rising out of the shelf. The island looked narrow and long, like a freight train, and if they squinted they could see clusters of trees and what looked like enormous sheets of white cloth billowing in the wind.

"I've discovered an island!" Count Olaf cackled. "I'm going to name it Olaf-Land!"

"You didn't discover the island," Violet pointed out. "It appears that people already live on it."

"And I am their king!" Count Olaf proclaimed. "Hurry up, orphans! My royal subjects are going to cook me a big breakfast, and if I'm in a good mood I might let you lick the plates!"

The Baudelaires had no intention of licking the plates of Olaf or anyone else, but nevertheless they continued walking toward the island, maneuvering around the wreckage that still littered the surface of the shelf. They had just walked around a grand piano, which was sticking straight out of the water as if it had fallen from the sky, when something caught the Baudelaire eyes—a tiny white figure, scurrying toward them.

"What?" Sunny asked. "Who?"

“It might be another survivor of the storm,” Klaus said. “Our boat couldn’t have been the only one in this area of the ocean.”

“Do you think the storm reached Kit Snicket?” Violet asked.

“Or the triplets?” Sunny said.

Count Olaf scowled, and put one muddy finger on the trigger of the harpoon gun. “If that’s Kit Snicket or some bratty orphan,” he said, “I’ll harpoon her right where she stands. No ridiculous volunteer is going to take my island away from me!”

“You don’t want to waste your last harpoon,” Violet said, thinking quickly. “Who knows where you’ll find another one?”

“That’s true,” Olaf admitted. “You’re becoming an excellent henchwoman.”

“Poppycock,” growled Sunny, baring her teeth at the count.

“My sister’s right,” Klaus said. “It’s ridiculous to argue about volunteers and henchpeople when we’re standing on a coastal shelf in the middle of the ocean.”

“Don’t be so sure, orphan,” Olaf replied. “No matter where we are, there’s always room for someone like me.” He leaned down close to give Klaus a sneaky smile, as if he were telling a joke. “Haven’t you learned that by now?”

It was an unpleasant question, but the Baudelaires did not have time to answer it, as the figure drew closer and closer until the children could see it was a young girl, perhaps six or seven years old. She was barefoot, and dressed in a simple, white robe that was so clean she could not have been in the storm. Hanging from the girl’s belt was a large white seashell, and she was wearing a pair of sunglasses that looked very much like the ones the Baudelaires had worn as concierges. She was grinning from ear to ear, but when she reached the Baudelaires, panting from her long run, she suddenly looked shy, and although the Baudelaires were quite curious as to who she was, they also found themselves keeping silent. Even Olaf did not speak, and merely admired his reflection in the water.

When you find yourself tongue-tied in front of someone you do not know, you might want to remember something the Baudelaires' mother told them long ago, and something she told me even longer ago. I can see her now, sitting on a small couch she used to keep in the corner of her bedroom, adjusting the straps of her sandals with one hand and munching on an apple with the other, telling me not to worry about the party that was beginning downstairs. "People love to talk about themselves, Mr. Snicket," she said to me, between bites of apple. "If you find yourself wondering what to say to any of the guests, ask them which secret code they prefer, or find out whom they've been spying on lately." Violet, too, could almost hear her mother's voice as she gazed down at this young girl, and decided to ask her something about herself.

"What's your name?" Violet asked.

The girl fiddled with her seashell, and then looked up at the eldest Baudelaire. "Friday," she said.

"Do you live on the island, Friday?" Violet asked.

"Yes," the girl said. "I got up early this morning to go storm scavenging."

"Storm scavawha?" Sunny asked, from Violet's shoulders.

"Every time there's a storm, everyone in the colony gathers everything that's collected on the coastal shelf," Friday said. "One never knows when one of these items will come in handy. Are you castaways?"

"I guess we are," Violet said. "We were traveling by boat when we got caught in the storm. I'm Violet Baudelaire, and this is my brother, Klaus, and my sister, Sunny." She turned reluctantly to Olaf, who was glaring at Friday suspiciously. "And this is—"

"I am your king!" Olaf announced in a grand voice. "Bow before me, Friday!"

"No, thank you," Friday said politely. "Our colony is not a monarchy. You must be exhausted from the storm, Baudelaires. It looked so enormous from shore that we didn't think there'd be any castaways this time. Why don't you come with me, and you can have something to eat?"

"We'd be most grateful," Klaus said. "Do castaways arrive on this island very often?"

"From time to time," Friday said, with a small shrug. "It seems that everything eventually washes up on our shores."

"The shores of Olaf-Land, you mean," Count Olaf growled. "I discovered the island, so I get to name it."

Friday peered at Olaf curiously from behind her sunglasses. "You must be confused, sir, after your journey through the storm," she said. "People have lived on the island for many, many years."

"Primitive people," sneered the villain. "I don't even see any houses on the island."

"We live in tents," Friday said, pointing at the billowing white cloths on the island. "We grew tired of building houses that would only get blown away during the stormy season, and the rest of the time the weather is so hot that we appreciate the ventilation that a tent provides."

"I still say you're primitive," Olaf insisted, "and I don't listen to primitive people."

"I won't force you," Friday said. "Come along with me and you can decide for yourself."

"I'm not going to come along with you," Count Olaf said, "and neither are my henchpeople! I'm Count Olaf, and I'm in charge around here, not some little idiot in a robe!"

“There’s no reason to be insulting,” Friday said. “The island is the only place you can go, Count Olaf, so it really doesn’t matter who’s in charge.”

Count Olaf gave Friday a terrible scowl, and he pointed his harpoon gun straight at the young girl. “If you don’t bow before me, Friday, I’ll fire this harpoon gun at you!”

The Baudelaires gasped, but Friday merely frowned at the villain. “In a few minutes,” she said, “all the inhabitants of the island will be out storm scavenging. They’ll see any act of violence you commit, and you won’t be allowed on the island. Please point that weapon away from me.”

Count Olaf opened his mouth as if to say something, but after a moment he shut it again, and lowered the harpoon gun sheepishly, a word which here means “looking quite embarrassed to be following the orders of a young girl.”

“Baudelaires, please come with me,” Friday said, and began to lead the way toward the distant island.

“What about me?” Count Olaf asked. His voice was a little squeaky, and it reminded the Baudelaires of other voices they had heard, from people who were frightened of Olaf himself. They had heard this voice from guardians of theirs, and from Mr. Poe when the villain would confront him. It was a tone of voice they had heard from various volunteers when discussing Olaf’s activities, and even from his henchmen when they complained about their wicked boss. It was a tone of voice the Baudelaires had heard from themselves, during the countless times the dreadful man had threatened them, and promised to get his hands on their fortune, but the children never thought they would hear it from Count Olaf himself. “What about me?” he asked again, but the siblings had already followed Friday a short way from where he was standing, and when the Baudelaire orphans turned to him, Olaf looked like just another piece of detritus that the storm had blown onto the coastal shelf.

“Go away,” Friday said firmly, and the castaways wondered if finally they had found a place where there was no room for Count Olaf.

CHAPTER
Three

As I'm sure you know, there are many words in our mysterious and confusing language that can mean two completely different things. The word "bear," for instance, can refer to a rather husky mammal found in the woods, as in the sentence "The bear moved quietly toward the camp counselor, who was too busy putting on lipstick to notice," but it can also refer to how much someone can handle, as in the sentence "The loss of my camp counselor is more than I can bear." The word "yarn" can refer both to a colorful strand of wool, as in the sentence "His sweater was made of yarn," and to a long and rambling story, as in the sentence "His yarn about how he lost his sweater almost put me to sleep." The word "hard" can refer both to something that is difficult and something that is firm to the touch, and unless you come across a sentence like "The bears bear hard hard yarn yarns" you are unlikely to be confused. But as the Baudelaire orphans followed Friday across the coastal shelf toward the island where she lived, they experienced both definitions of the word "cordial," which can refer both to a person who is friendly and to a drink that is sweet, and the more they had of one the more they were confused about the other.

“Perhaps you would care for some coconut cordial,” Friday said, in a cordial tone of voice, and she reached down to the seashell that hung around her neck. With one slim finger she plucked out a stopper, and the children could see that the shell had been fashioned into a sort of canteen. “You must be thirsty from your journey through the storm.”

“We are thirsty,” Violet admitted, “but isn’t fresh water better for thirst?”

“There’s no fresh water on the island,” Friday said. “There’s some saltwater falls that we use for washing, and a saltwater pool that’s perfect for swimming. But all we drink is coconut cordial. We drain the milk from coconuts and allow it to ferment.”

“Ferment?” Sunny asked.

“Friday means that the coconut milk sits around for some time, and undergoes a chemical process making it sweeter and stronger,” Klaus explained, having learned about fermentation in a book about a vineyard his parents had kept in the Baudelaire library.

“The sweetness will wash away the taste of the storm,” Friday said, and passed the seashell to the three children. One by one they each took a sip of the cordial. As Friday had said, the cordial was quite sweet, but there was another taste beyond the sweetness, something odd and strong that made them a bit dizzy. Violet and Klaus both winced as the cordial slipped thickly down their throats, and Sunny coughed as soon as the first drop reached her tongue.

“It’s a little strong for us, Friday,” Violet said, handing the seashell back to Friday.

“You’ll get used to it,” Friday said with a smile, “when you drink it at every meal. That’s one of the customs here.”

“I see,” Klaus said, making a note in his commonplace book. “What other customs do you have here?”

“Not too many,” Friday said, looking first at Klaus’s notebook and then around her, where the Baudelaires could see the distant figures of other islanders, all dressed in white, walking around the costal shelf and poking at the wreckage they found. “Every time there’s a storm, we go storm scavenging and present what we’ve found to a man named Ishmael. Ishmael has been on this island longer than any of us, and he injured his feet some time ago and keeps them covered in island clay, which has healing powers. Ishmael can’t even stand, but he serves as the island’s facilitator.”

“Demarc?” Sunny asked Klaus.

“A facilitator is someone who helps other people make decisions,” the middle Baudelaire explained.

Friday nodded in agreement. “Ishmael decides what detritus might be of use to us, and what the sheep should drag away.”

“There are sheep on the island?” Violet asked.

“A herd of wild sheep washed up on our shores many, many years ago,” Friday said, “and they roam free, except when they’re needed to drag our scavenged items to the arboretum, on the far side of the island over that brae over there."

"Brae?" Sunny asked.

"A brae is a steep hill," Klaus said, "and an arboretum is a place where trees grow."

"All that grows in the island's arboretum is one enormous apple tree," Friday said, "or at least, that's what I've heard."

"You've never been to the far side of the island?" Violet asked.

"No one goes to the far side of the island," Friday said. "Ishmael says it's too dangerous with all the items the sheep have brought there. Nobody even picks the bitter apples from the tree, except on Decision Day."

"Holiday?" Sunny asked.

"I guess it's something of a holiday," Friday said. "Once a year, the tides turn in this part of the ocean, and the coastal shelf is completely covered in water. It's the one time a year that it's deep enough to sail away from the island. All year long we build an enormous outrigger, which is a type of canoe, and the day the tides turn we have a feast and a talent show. Then anyone who wishes to leave our colony indicates their decision by taking a bite of bitter apple and spitting it onto the ground before boarding the outrigger and bidding us farewell."

"Yuck," the youngest Baudelaire said, imagining a crowd of people spitting up apple.

"There's nothing yucky about it," Friday said with a frown. "It's the colony's most important custom."

"I'm sure it's wonderful," Violet said, reminding her sister with a stern glance that it is not polite to insult the customs of others.

"It is," Friday said. "Of course, people rarely leave this island. No one has left since before I was born, so each year we simply light the outrigger on fire, and push it out to sea. Watching a burning outrigger slowly vanish on the horizon is a beautiful sight."

"It sounds beautiful," Klaus said, although the middle Baudelaire thought it sounded more creepy than beautiful, "but it seems a waste to build a canoe every year only to burn it up."

"It gives us something to do," Friday said with a shrug. "Besides building the outrigger, there's not much to occupy us on the island. We catch fish, and cook meals, and do the laundry, but that still leaves much of the day unoccupied."

"Cook?" Sunny asked eagerly.

"My sister is something of a chef," Klaus said. "I'm sure she'd be happy to help with the cooking."

Friday smiled, and put her hands in the deep pockets of her robe. "I'll keep that in mind," she said. "Are you sure you don't want another sip of cordial?"

All three Baudelaires shook their heads. "No, thank you," Violet said, "but it's kind of you to offer."

"Ishmael says that everyone should be treated with kindness," Friday said, "unless they are unkind themselves. That's why I left that horrible man Count Olaf behind. Were you traveling with him?"

The Baudelaires looked at one another, unsure of how to answer this question. On one hand, Friday seemed very cordial, but like the cordial she offered, there was something else besides sweetness in her description of the island. The colony's customs sounded very strict, and although the siblings were relieved to be out of Count Olaf's company, there seemed something cruel about abandoning Olaf on the coastal shelf, even though he certainly would have done the same to the orphans if he'd had the opportunity. Violet, Klaus, and Sunny were not sure how Friday would react if they admitted being in the villain's company, and they did not reply for a moment, until the middle Baudelaire remembered an expression he had read in a novel about people who were very, very polite.

“It depends on how you look at it,” Klaus said, using a phrase which sounds like an answer but scarcely means anything at all. Friday gave him a curious look, but the children had reached the end of the coastal shelf and were standing at the edge of the island. It was a sloping beach with sand so white that Friday’s white robe looked almost invisible, and at the top of the slope was an outrigger, fashioned from wild grasses and the limbs of trees, which looked nearly finished, as if Decision Day was arriving soon. Past the outrigger was an enormous white tent, as long as a school bus. The Baudelaires followed Friday inside the tent, and found to their surprise that it was filled with sheep, who all lay dozing on the ground. The sheep appeared to be tied together with thick, frayed rope, and towering over the sheep was an old man smiling at the Baudelaires through a beard as thick and wild as the sheep’s woolly coats. He sat in an enormous chair that looked as if it were fashioned out of white clay, and two more piles of clay rose up where his feet should have been. He was wearing a robe like Friday’s and had a similar seashell hanging from his belt, and his voice was as cordial as Friday’s as he smiled down at the three siblings.

“What have we here?” he said.

“I found three castaways on the coastal shelf,” Friday said proudly.

“Welcome, castaways,” Ishmael said. “Forgive me for remaining seated, but my feet are quite sore today, so I’m making use of our healing clay. It’s very nice to meet you.”

“It’s nice to meet you, Ishmael,” said Violet, who thought healing clay was of dubious scientific efficacy, a phrase which here means “unlikely to heal sore feet.”

“Call me Ish,” said Ishmael, leaning down to scratch the heads of one of the sheep. “And what shall I call you?”

“Violet, Klaus, and Sunny Baudelaire,” Friday chimed in, before the siblings could introduce themselves.

“Baudelaire?” Ishmael repeated, and raised his eyebrows. He gazed at the three children in silence as he took a long sip of cordial from his seashell, and for just one moment his smile seemed to disappear. But then he gazed down at the siblings and grinned heartily. “We haven’t had new islanders in quite some time. You’re welcome to stay as long as you’d like, unless you’re unkind, of course.”

“Thank you,” Klaus said, as kindly as he could. “Friday has told us a few things about the island. It sounds quite interesting.”

“It depends on how you look at it,” Ishmael said. “Even if you want to leave, you’ll only have the opportunity once a year. In the meantime, Friday, why don’t you show them to a tent, so they can change their clothes? We should have some new woolen robes that fit you nicely.”

“We would appreciate that,” Violet said. “Our concierge uniforms are quite soaked from the storm.”

“I’m sure they are,” Ishmael said, twisting a strand of beard in his fingers. “Besides, our custom is to wear nothing but white, to match the sand of the islands, the healing clay of the pool, and the wool of the wild sheep. Friday, I’m surprised you are choosing to break with tradition.”

Friday blushed, and her hand rose to the sunglasses she was wearing. “I found these in the wreckage,” she said. “The sun is so bright on the island, I thought they might come in handy.”

“I won’t force you,” Ishmael said calmly, “but it seems to me you might prefer to dress according to custom, rather than showing off your new eyewear.”

“You’re right, Ishmael,” Friday said quietly, and removed her sunglasses with one hand while the other hand darted into one of her robe’s deep pockets.

“That’s better,” Ishmael said, and smiled at the Baudelaires. “I hope you will enjoy living on this island,” he said. “We’re all castaways here, from one storm or another, and rather than trying to return to the world, we've built a colony safe from the world's treachery."

"There was a treacherous person with them," Friday piped up eagerly. "His name was Count Olaf, but he was so nasty that I didn't let him come with us."

"Olaf?" Ishmael said, and his eyebrows raised again. "Is this man a friend of yours?"

"Fat chance," Sunny said.

"No, he isn't," Violet translated quickly. "To tell you the truth, we've been trying to escape from Count Olaf for quite some time."

"He's a dreadful man," Klaus said.

"Same boat," Sunny said.

"Hmmm," Ishmael said thoughtfully. "Is that the whole story, Baudelaires?"

The children looked at one another. Of course, the few sentences they'd uttered were not the whole story. There was much, much more to the story of the Baudelaires and Count Olaf, and if the children had recited all of it Ishmael probably would have wept until the tears melted away the clay so his feet were bare and he had nothing to sit on. The Baudelaires could have told the island's facilitator about all of Count Olaf's schemes, from his vicious murder of Uncle Monty to his betrayal of Madame Lulu at the Caligari Carnival. They could have told him about his disguises, from his false peg leg when he was pretending to be Captain Sham, to his running shoes and turban when he was calling himself Coach Genghis. They could have told Ishmael about Olaf's many comrades, from his girlfriend Esmé Squalor to the two white-faced women who had disappeared in the Mortmain Mountains, and they could have told Ishmael about all of the unsolved mysteries that still kept the Baudelaires awake at night, from the disappearance of Captain Widdershins from an underwater cavern to the strange taxi driver who had approached the children outside the Hotel

Denouement, and of course they could have told Ishmael about that ghastly day at Briny Beach, when they first heard the news of their parents' deaths. But if the Baudelaires had told Ishmael the whole story, they would have had to tell the parts that put the Baudelaires in an unfavorable light, a phrase which here means "the things the Baudelaires had done that were perhaps as treacherous as Olaf." They would have talked about their own schemes, from digging a pit to trap Esmé to starting the fire that destroyed the Hotel Denouement. They would have mentioned their own disguises, from Sunny pretending to be Chabo the Wolf Baby to Violet and Klaus pretending to be Snow Scouts, and their own comrades, from Justice Strauss, who turned out to be more useful than they had first thought, to Fiona, who turned out to be more treacherous than they had imagined. If the Baudelaire orphans had told Ishmael the whole story, they might have looked as villainous as Count Olaf. The Baudelaires did not want to find themselves back on the coastal shelf, with all the detritus of the storm. They wanted to be safe from treachery and harm, even if the customs of the island colony were not exactly to their liking, and so, rather than telling Ishmael the whole story, the Baudelaires merely nodded, and said the safest thing they could think of.

"It depends on how you look at it," Violet said, and her siblings nodded in agreement.

"Very well," Ishmael said. "Run along and find your robes, and once you've changed, please give all of your old things to Friday and we'll haul them off to the arboretum."

"Everything?" Klaus said.

Ishmael nodded. "That's our custom."

"Occulaklaus?" Sunny asked, and her siblings quickly explained that she meant something like, "What about Klaus's glasses?"

"He can scarcely read without them," Violet added.

Ishmael raised his eyebrows again. "Well, there's no library here," he said quickly, with a nervous glance at Friday, "but I suppose your eyeglasses are of some use. Now, hurry along, Baudelaires, unless you'd like a sip of cordial before you go."

"No, thank you," Klaus said, wondering how many times he and his siblings would be offered this strange, sweet beverage. "My siblings and I tried some, and didn't care much for the taste."

"I won't force you," Ishmael said again, "but your initial opinion on just about anything may change over time. See you soon, Baudelaires."

He gave them a small wave, and the Baudelaires waved back as Friday led them out of the tent and farther uphill where more tents were fluttering in the morning breeze.

"Choose any tent you like," Friday said. "We all switch tents each day—except for Ishmael, because of his feet."

"Isn't it confusing to sleep in a different place each night?" Violet asked.

"It depends on how you look at it," Friday said, taking a sip from her seashell. "I've never slept any other way."

"Have you lived your whole life on this island?" Klaus said.

"Yes," Friday said. "My mother and father took an ocean cruise while she was pregnant, and ran into a terrible storm. My father was devoured by a manatee, and my mother was washed ashore when she was pregnant with me. You'll meet her soon. Now please hurry up and change."

"Prompt," Sunny assured her, and Friday took her hand out of her pocket and shook Sunny's. The Baudelaires walked into the nearest tent, where a pile of robes lay folded in one corner. In moments, they changed into their new clothes, happy to discard their concierge uniforms, which were soaked and salty from the night's storm. When they were finished, however, they stood and stared for a moment at the pile of damp clothing. The Baudelaires felt strange to don the garments of shibboleth, a phrase which here means "wear the warm and somewhat unflattering clothing that was customary to people they hardly knew." It felt as if the three siblings were casting away everything that had happened to them prior to their arrival on the island. Their clothing, of course, was not the Baudelaires' whole story, as clothing is never anyone's whole story, except perhaps in the case of Esmé Squalor, whose villainous and fashionable clothing revealed just how villainous and fashionable she was. But the Baudelaires could not help but feel that they were abandoning their previous lives, in favor of new lives on an island of strange customs.

"I won't throw away this ribbon," Violet said, winding the slender piece of cloth through her fingertips. "I'm still going to invent things, no matter what Ishmael says."

"I'm not throwing away my commonplace book," Klaus said, holding the dark blue notebook. "I'll still research things, even if there's no library here."

"No throw this," Sunny said, and held up a small metal implement so her siblings could see. One end was a small, simple handle, perfect for Sunny's petite hands, and the other end branched into several sturdy wires that were meshed together like a small shrubbery.

"What is that?" Violet asked.

"Whisk," Sunny said, and she was exactly right. A whisk is a kitchen tool used to mix ingredients together rapidly, and the youngest Baudelaire was happy to have such a useful item in her possession.

"Yes," Klaus said. "I remember our father used to use it when he prepared scrambled eggs. But where did it come from?"

"Gal Friday," Sunny said.

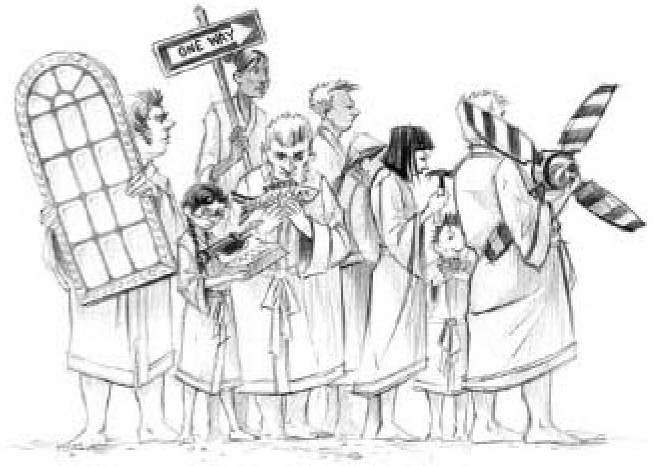
"She knows Sunny can cook," Violet said, "but she must have thought Ishmael would make her throw the whisk away."

"I guess she's not so eager to follow all of the colony's customs," Klaus said.

“Guesso,” Sunny agreed, and put the whisk in one of her robe’s deep pockets. Klaus did the same with his commonplace book, and Violet did the same with her ribbon, and the three of them stood together for a moment, sharing their pocketed secrets. It felt strange to be keeping secrets from people who had taken them in so kindly, just as it felt strange not to tell Ishmael their whole story. The secrets of the ribbon, the commonplace book, and the whisk felt submerged, a word for “hidden” that usually applies to things underwater, such as a submarine submerged in the sea, or a boat’s figurehead submerged in a coastal shelf, and with each step the Baudelaires took out of the tent, they felt their submerged secrets bumping up against them from within the pockets of their robes.

The word “ferment,” like the words “bear,” “yarn,” and “hard,” can mean two completely different things. One meaning is the chemical process by which the juice of certain fruits becomes sweeter and stronger, as Klaus explained to his siblings on the coastal shelf. But the other meaning of “ferment” refers to something building inside someone, like a secret that may be eventually found out, or a scheme that someone has been planning for quite some time. As the three Baudelaires exited the tent, and handed the detritus of their previous lives to Friday, they felt their own secrets fermenting inside them, and wondered what other secrets and schemes lay undiscovered. The Baudelaire orphans followed Friday back down the sloping beach, and wondered what else was fermenting on this strange island that was their new home.

CHAPTER
Four



By the time the Baudelaire orphans returned to Ishmael's tent, the joint was hopping, a phrase which here means "full of islanders in white robes, all holding items they had scavenged from the coastal shelf." The sheep were no longer napping but standing stiffly in two long lines, and the ropes tying them together led to a large wooden sleigh—an unusual form of transportation in such warm weather. Friday led the children through the colonists and sheep, who stepped aside and looked curiously at the three new castaways. Although this was the first time that the Baudelaires were castaways, they were accustomed to being strangers in a community, from their days at Prufrock Preparatory School to their time spent in the Village of Fowl Devotees, but they still did not enjoy being stared at. But it is one of the strange truths of life that practically nobody likes to be stared at and that practically nobody can stop themselves from staring, and as the three children made their way toward Ishmael, who was still sitting on his enormous clay chair, the Baudelaires could not help looking back at the islanders with the same curiosity, wondering how so many people could become castaways on the same island. It was as if the world was full of people with lives as unfortunate as that of the Baudelaires, all ending up in the very same place.

Friday led the Baudelaires to the base of Ishmael's chair, and the facilitator smiled down at the children as they sat at his clay-covered feet. "Those white robes look very handsome on you Baudelaires," he said. "Much better than those uniforms you were wearing earlier. You're going to be wonderful colonists, I am sure of it."

"Pyrrhonic?" Sunny said, which meant something along the lines of, "How can you be sure of such a thing based on our clothing?" But rather than translate, Violet remembered that the colony valued kindness and decided to say something kind.

"I can't tell you how much we appreciate this," Violet said, careful not to lean against the mounds of clay that hid Ishmael's toes. "We didn't know what would happen to us after the storm, and we're grateful to you, Ishmael, for taking us in."

"Everyone is taken in here," Ishmael said, apparently forgetting that Count Olaf had been abandoned. "And please, call me Ish. Would you like some cordial?"

"No, thank you," said Klaus, who could not bring himself to call the facilitator by his nickname. "We'd like to meet the other colonists, if that's all right."

"Of course," Ishmael said, and clapped his hands for attention. "Islanders!" he cried. "As I'm sure you've noticed, we have three new castaways with us today—Violet, Klaus, and Sunny, the only survivors of that terrible storm. I'm not going to force you, but as you bring up your storm scavenging items for my suggestions, why don't you introduce yourselves to our new colonists?"

"Good idea, Ishmael," said someone from the back of the tent.

"Call me Ish," said Ishmael, stroking his beard. "Now then, who's first?"

“I suppose I am,” said a pleasant-looking man who was holding what looked like a large, metal flower. “It’s nice to meet you three. My name is Alonso, and I’ve found the propeller of an airplane. The poor pilot must have flown straight into the storm.”

“What a shame,” Ishmael said. “Well, there’s no airplane to be found on the island, so I don’t think a propeller will be of much use.”

“Excuse me,” Violet said hesitantly, “but I know something about mechanical devices. If we rigged the propeller up to a simple handpowered motor, we’d have a perfect fan for keeping cool on particularly hot days.”

There was a murmur of appreciation from the crowd, and Alonso smiled at Violet. “It does get mighty hot around here,” he said. “That’s a good idea.”

Ishmael took a sip of cordial from his seashell, and then frowned at the propeller. “It depends on how you look at it,” he said. “If we only made one fan, then we’d all be arguing over who got to stand in front of it.”

“We could take turns,” Alonso said.

“Whose turn will it be on the hottest day of the year?” Ishmael countered, a word which here means “said in a firm and sensible tone of voice, even though it was not necessarily a sensible thing to say.” “I’m not going to force you, Alonso, but I don’t think building a fan is worth all the fuss it might cause.”

“I suppose you’re right,” Alonso said, with a shrug, and put the propeller on the wooden sleigh. “The sheep can take it to the arboretum.”

“An excellent decision,” Ishmael said, as a girl perhaps one or two years older than Violet stepped forward.

“I’m Ariel,” she said, “and I found this in a particularly shallow part of the shelf. I think it’s a dagger.”

“A dagger?” Ishmael said. “You know we don’t welcome weapons on the island.”

Klaus was peering at the item Ariel was holding, which was made of carved wood rather than metal. “I don’t think that’s a dagger,” Klaus said. “I believe it’s an old tool used for cutting the pages of books. Nowadays most books are sold with their pages already separated, but some years ago each page was attached to the next, so you needed an implement to slice open the folds of paper and read the book.”

“That’s interesting,” Ariel remarked.

“It depends on how you look at it,” Ishmael said. “I fail to see how it could be of use here. We’ve never had a single book wash ashore—the storms simply tear the pages apart.”

Klaus reached into his pocket and touched his hidden commonplace book. “You never know when a book might turn up,” he pointed out. “In my opinion, that tool might be useful to keep around.”

Ishmael sighed, looking first at Klaus and then at the girl who had found the item. “Well, I’m not going to force you, Ariel,” he said, “but if I were you I would toss that silly thing onto the sleigh.”

“I’m sure you’re right,” Ariel said, shrugging at Klaus, and she put the page cutter next to the propeller as a plump man with a sunburned face stepped forward.

“Sherman’s the name,” said Sherman, with a little bow to all three siblings. “And I found a cheese grater. I nearly lost a finger prying it away from a nest of crabs!”

“You shouldn’t have gone to all that trouble,” Ishmael said. “We’re not going to have much use for a cheese grater without any cheese.”

“Grate coconut,” Sunny said. “Delicious cake.”

“Cake?” Sherman said. “Egad, that would be delicious. We haven’t had dessert since I’ve arrived here.”

“Coconut cordial is sweeter than dessert,” Ishmael said, raising his seashell to his lips. “I certainly wouldn’t force you, Sherman, but I do think it would be best if that grater were thrown away.”

Sherman took a sip from his own seashell, and then nodded, looking down at the sand. “Very well,” he said, and the rest of the morning proceeded in a similar manner. Islander after islander introduced themselves and presented the items they had found, and nearly every time the colony’s facilitator discouraged them from keeping anything. A bearded man named Robinson found a pair of overalls, but Ishmael reminded him that the colony only wore the customary white robes, even though Violet could imagine herself wearing them while inventing some sort of mechanical device, so as not to get her robe dirty. An old woman named Erewhon held up a pair of skis that Ishmael dismissed as impractical, although Klaus had read of people who had used skis to cross mud and sand, and a red-haired woman named Weyden offered a salad spinner, but Ishmael reminded her that the island’s only salads were to be made from the seaweed that was rinsed in the pool and dried out in the sun, rather than spun, even though Sunny could almost taste a dried coconut snack that such an appliance could have made. Ferdinand offered a brass cannon, which Ishmael was afraid would hurt someone, and Larsen held up a lawn mower only to have Ishmael remind her that the beach did not need to be trimmed regularly. A boy about Klaus’s age introduced himself as Omeros, and held up a deck of playing cards he had found, but Ishmael convinced him that a deck of cards was likely to lead to gambling, and he dumped his item into the sleigh, as did a young girl named Finn, who’d found a typewriter that Ishmael had pronounced useless without paper. Brewster had found a window that had survived the storm without breaking, but Ishmael pointed out that you didn’t need a window to admire the island’s views, and Calypso had found a door that the facilitator had hinted could not be attached to any of the island’s tents. Byam, whose mustache was unusually curly, discarded some batteries he had found, and Willa, whose head was unusually large, decided against a garden hose that was encrusted with barnacles. Mr. Pitcairn took the top of a chest of drawers to the arboretum, followed by Ms. Marlow, who had the bottom of a barrel. Dr. Kurtz threw out a silver tray, and Professor Fletcher ejected a chandelier, while Madame Nordoff denied the island a checkerboard and Rabbi Bligh agreed that the services of a large, ornate bird cage were not necessary on the island. The only items that the islanders ended up keeping were a few nets, which they would add to their supply of nets used to catch fish, and a few blankets, which Ishmael thought would eventually fade to white in the island sun. Finally, two siblings named Jonah and Sadie Bellamy displayed the boat on which the Baudelaires had arrived, with its figurehead still missing and its nameplate reading COUNT OLAF still taped to the back, but the colony was almost finished with its customary outrigger for Decision Day, and so the Bellamys lifted the boat onto the sleigh without much discussion. The sheep wearily dragged the sleigh out of the tent, up over the brae, and toward the far side of the island to dump the items in the arboretum, and the islanders excused themselves, at Ishmael's suggestion, to wash their hands for lunch. Within moments the only occupants of the tent were Ishmael, the Baudelaire orphans, and the girl who had first brought them to the tent, as if the siblings were merely another piece of wreckage to be picked over for approval.

"Quite a storm, wasn't it?" asked Ishmael, after a short silence. "We scavenged even more junk than usual."

"Were any other castaways found?" Violet asked.

"Do you mean Count Olaf?" Ishmael asked. "After Friday abandoned him, he'd never dare approach the island. He's either wandering around the coastal shelf, or he's trying to swim his way back to wherever he came from."

The Baudelaires looked at one another, knowing full well that Count Olaf was likely hatching some scheme, particularly as none of the islanders had found the boat's figurehead, where the deadly spores of the Medusoid Mycelium were hidden. "We weren't just thinking of Olaf," Klaus said. "We had some friends who may have been caught in the same storm—a pregnant woman named Kit Snicket who was in a submarine with some associates, and a group of people who were traveling by air."

Ishmael frowned, and drank some cordial from his seashell. “Those people haven’t turned up,” he said, “but don’t despair, Baudelaires. It seems that everything eventually washes up on our shores. Perhaps their crafts were unharmed by the storm.”

“Perhaps,” Sunny agreed, trying not to think that they might not have been as lucky as that.

“They might turn up in the next day or so,” Ishmael continued. “Another storm is heading this way.”

“How do you know?” Violet asked. “Is there a barometer on the island?”

“There’s no barometer,” Ishmael said, referring to a device that measures the pressure in the atmosphere, which is one way of predicting the weather. “I just know there’s one coming.”

“How would you know such a thing?” Klaus asked, stopping himself from retrieving his commonplace book so he could take notes. “I’ve always heard that the weather is difficult to predict without advanced instruments.”

“We don’t need any advanced instruments on this colony,” Ishmael said. “I predict the weather by using magic.”

“Meledrub,” Sunny said, which meant something along the lines of, “I find that very difficult to believe,” and her siblings silently agreed. The Baudelaires, as a rule, did not believe in magic, although their mother had had a nifty card trick she could occasionally be persuaded to perform. Like all people who have seen something of the world, the children had come across plenty of things they had been unable to explain, from the diabolical hypnotism techniques of Dr. Orwell to the way a girl named Fiona had broken Klaus’s heart, but they had never been tempted to solve these mysteries with a supernatural explanation like magic. Late at night, of course, when one is sitting upright in bed, having been woken up by a sudden loud noise, one believes in all sorts of supernatural things, but it was early afternoon, and the Baudelaires simply could not imagine that Ishmael was some sort of magical weatherman. Their doubt must have shown on their faces, for the facilitator immediately did what many people do when they are not believed, and hurriedly changed the subject.

"What about you, Friday?" Ishmael asked. "Did you find anything else besides the castaways and those awful sunglasses?"

Friday looked quickly at Sunny, but then shook her head firmly. "No," she said.

"Then please go help your mother with lunch," he said, "while I talk to our new colonists."

"Do I have to?" Friday asked. "I'd rather stay here, with the Baudelaires."

"I'm not going to force you," Ishmael said gently, "but I'm sure your mother could use some help."

Without another word, Friday turned and left the tent, walking up the sloping beach toward the other tents of the colony, and the Baudelaires were alone with their facilitator, who leaned down to speak quietly to the orphans.

"Baudelaires," he said, "as your facilitator, allow me to give you a piece of advice, as you begin your stay on this island."

"What might that be?" Violet asked.

Ishmael looked around the tent, as if spies were lurking behind the white, fluttering fabric. He took another sip from his seashell, and cracked his knuckles. "Don't rock the boat," he said, using an expression which here means "Don't upset people by doing something that is not customary." His tone was very cordial, but the children could hear something less cordial almost hidden in his voice, the way a coastal shelf is almost hidden by water. "We've been living by our customs for quite some time. Most of us can scarcely remember our lives before we became castaways, and there is a whole generation of islanders who have never lived anywhere else. My advice to you is not to ask so many questions or meddle around too much with our customs. We have taken you in, Baudelaires, which is a kindness, and we expect kindness in return. If you keep prying into the affairs of the island, people are going to think you're unkind—just like Friday thought Olaf was unkind. So don't rock the boat. After all, rocking the boat is what got you here in the first place."

Ishmael smiled at his little joke, and although they found nothing funny about poking fun at a shipwreck that had nearly killed them, the children gave Ishmael a nervous smile in return, and said no more. The tent was silent for a few minutes, until a pleasant-looking woman with a freckly face walked into the tent carrying an enormous clay jar.

"You must be the Baudelaires," she said, as Friday followed her into the tent carrying a stack of bowls fashioned from coconut shells, "and you must be starving, too. I'm Mrs. Caliban, Friday's mother, and I do most of the cooking around here. Why don't you have some lunch?"

"That would be wonderful," Klaus said. "We're quite hungry."

"Whatya fixin?" asked Sunny.

Mrs. Caliban smiled, and opened the jar so the children could peek inside. "Ceviche," she said. "It's a South American dish of chopped raw seafood."

"Oh," Violet said, with as much enthusiasm as she could muster. Ceviche is an acquired taste, a phrase which here means "something you don't like the first few times you eat it," and although the Baudelaires had eaten ceviche before—their mother used to make it in the Baudelaire kitchen, to celebrate the beginning of crab season—it was none of the children's favorite food, and not precisely what they had in mind as a first meal after being shipwrecked. When I was shipwrecked recently, for instance, I had the fortune to wash aboard a barge where I enjoyed a late supper of roast leg of lamb with creamed polenta and a fricassee of baby artichokes, followed by some aged Gouda served with roasted figs, and finished up with some fresh strawberries dipped in milk chocolate and crushed honeycomb, and I found this to be a wonderful antidote to being tossed like a rag doll in the turbulent waters of a particularly stormy creek.

But the Baudelaires accepted their bowls of ceviche, as well as the strange utensils Friday handed them, which were made of wood and looked like a combination of a fork and a spoon.

“They’re runcible spoons,” Friday explained. “We don’t have forks or knives in the colony, as they can be used as weapons.”

“I suppose that’s sensible,” Klaus said, although he couldn’t help but think that nearly anything could be used as a weapon, if one were in a weaponry mood.

“I hope you like it,” Mrs. Caliban said. “There’s not much else you can cook with raw seafood.”

“Negihama,” Sunny said.

“My sister is something of a chef,” Violet explained, “and was suggesting that she could prepare some Japanese dishes for the colony, if there were any wasabi to be had.”

The younger Baudelaires gave their sister a brief nod, realizing that Violet was asking about wasabi not only because it might allow Sunny to make something palatable—a word which here means “that wasn’t ceviche”—but because wasabi, which is a sort of horseradish often used in Japanese food, was one of the few defenses against the Medusoid Mycelium, and with Count Olaf lurking about, she wanted to think about possible strategies should the deadly fungus be let loose from the helmet.

“We don’t have any wasabi,” Mrs. Caliban said. “We don’t have any spices at all, in fact. No spices have washed up on the coastal shelf.”

“Even if they did,” Ishmael added quickly, “I think we’d just throw them in the arboretum. The stomachs of the colonists are used to spiceless ceviche, and we wouldn’t want to rock the boat.”

Klaus took a bite of ceviche from his runcible spoon, and grimaced at the taste. Traditionally a ceviche is marinated in spices, which gives it an unusual but often delicious flavor, but without such seasoning, Mrs.

Caliban's ceviche tasted like whatever you might find in a fish's mouth while it was eating. "Do you eat ceviche for every meal?" he asked.

"Certainly not," Mrs. Caliban said with a little laugh. "That would get tiresome, wouldn't it? No, we only have ceviche for lunch. Every morning we have seaweed salad for breakfast, and for dinner we have a mild onion soup served with a handful of wild grass. You might get tired of such bland food, but it tastes better if you wash it down with coconut cordial." Friday's mother reached into a deep pocket in her white robe, and brought out three large seashells that had been fashioned into canteens, and handed one to each Baudelaire.

"Let's drink a toast," Friday suggested, holding up her own seashell. Mrs. Caliban raised hers, and Ishmael wiggled in his clay chair and opened the stopper of his seashell once more.

"An excellent idea," the facilitator said, with a wide, wide smile. "Let's drink a toast to the Baudelaire orphans!"

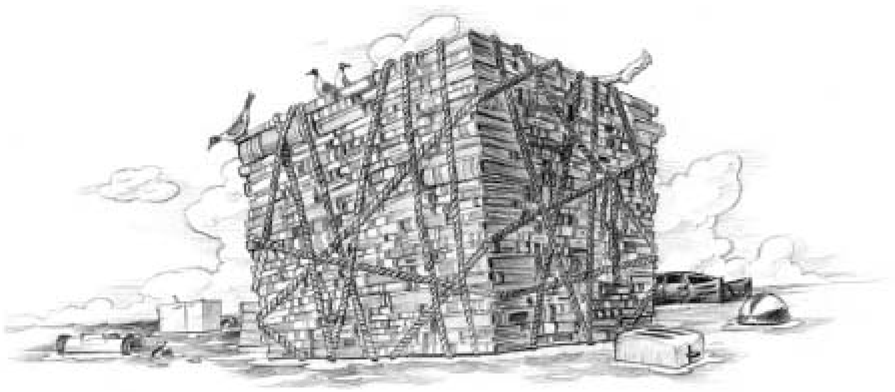
"To the Baudelaires!" agreed Mrs. Caliban, raising her seashell. "Welcome to the island!"

"I hope you stay here forever and ever!" Friday cried.

The Baudelaires looked at the three islanders grinning at them, and tried their best to grin back, although they had so much on their minds that their grins were not very enthusiastic. The Baudelaires wondered if they really had to eat spiceless ceviche, not only for this particular lunch, but for future lunches on the island. The Baudelaires wondered if they had to drink more of the coconut cordial, and if refusing to do so would be considered rocking the boat. They wondered why the figurehead of the boat had not been found, and they wondered where Count Olaf was, and what he was up to, and they wondered about their friends and associates who were somewhere at sea, and about all of the people they had left behind in the Hotel Denouement. But at this moment, the Baudelaires wondered one thing most of all, and that was why Ishmael had called them orphans, when they hadn't told him their whole story. Violet, Klaus, and Sunny looked first at their bowls of ceviche, and then at Friday and her mother, and then at their seashells, and finally up at Ishmael, who was smiling down at them from his enormous chair, and the castaways wondered if they really had reached a place that was far from the world’s treachery or if the world’s treachery was just hidden someplace, the way Count Olaf was hidden somewhere very nearby at that very moment. They looked up at their facilitator, uncertain if they were safe after all, and wondering what they could do about it if they weren’t.

“I won’t force you,” Ishmael said quietly to the children, and the Baudelaire orphans wondered if that were true after all.

CHAPTER
Five



Unless you are unusually insouciant—which is merely a fancy way of saying “the opposite of curious”—or one of the Baudelaire orphans yourself, you are probably wondering whether or not the three children drank the coconut cordial that was offered them rather forcefully by Ishmael. Perhaps you have been in situations yourself, where you have been offered a beverage or food you would rather not consume by someone you would rather not refuse, or perhaps you have been warned about people who will offer such things and told to avoid succumbing, a word which here means “accepting, rather than refusing, what you are given.” Such situations are often referred to as incidents of “peer pressure,” as “peer” is a word for someone with whom you are associating and “pressure” is a word for the influence such people often have. If you are a braeman or braewoman—a term for someone who lives all alone on a hill—then peer pressure is fairly easy to avoid, as you have no peers except for the occasional wild sheep who may wander near your cave and try to pressure you into growing a woolly coat. But if you live among people, whether they are people in your family, in your school, or in your secret organization, then every moment of your life is an incident of peer pressure, and you cannot avoid it any more than a boat at sea can avoid a surrounding storm. If you wake up in the morning at a particular time, when you would rather hide your head under your pillow until you are too hungry to stand it any longer, then you are succumbing to the peer pressure of your warden or morning butler. If you eat a breakfast that someone prepares for you, or prepare your own breakfast from food you have purchased, when you would rather stomp your feet and demand delicacies from faraway lands, then you are succumbing to the peer pressure of your grocer or breakfast chef. All day long, everyone in the world is succumbing to peer pressure, whether it is the pressure of their fourth grade peers to play dodge ball during recess or the pressure of their fellow circus performers to balance rubber balls on their noses, and if you try to avoid every instance of peer pressure you will end up without any peers whatsoever, and the trick is to succumb to enough pressure that you do not drive your peers away, but not so much that you end up in a situation in which you are dead or otherwise uncomfortable. This is a difficult trick, and most people never master it, and end up dead or uncomfortable at least once during their lives.

The Baudelaire orphans had been uncomfortable more than enough times over the course of their misadventures, and having found themselves on a distant island with only one set of peers to choose from, they succumbed to the pressure of Ishmael, and Friday, and Mrs. Caliban, and all of the other islanders who lived with the children in their new home. They sat in Ishmael’s tent, and drank a bit of coconut cordial as they ate their lunch of spice-free ceviche, even though the drink left them feeling a bit dizzy and the food left them feeling a bit slimy, rather than leaving the colony and finding their own food and drink. They wore their white robes, even though they were a bit heavy for the warm weather, rather than trying to fashion garments of their own. And they kept quiet about the discouraged items they were keeping in their pockets—Violet’s hair ribbon, Klaus’s commonplace book, and Sunny’s whisk—rather than rocking the boat, as the colony’s facilitator had warned them, not even daring to ask Friday why she had given Sunny the kitchen implement in the first place.

But despite the strong taste of cordial, the bland taste of the food, the unflattering robes, and the secret items, the Baudelaires still felt more at home than they had in quite some time. Although the children had always managed to find a companion or two no matter where they wandered, the Baudelaires had not really been accepted by any sort of community since Count Olaf had framed the children for murder, forcing them to hide and disguise themselves countless times. The Baudelaires felt safe living with the colony, knowing that Count Olaf was not allowed near them, and that their associates, if they, too, ended up as castaways, would be welcomed into the tent as long as they, too, succumbed to the islanders' peer pressure. Spiceless food, unflattering clothing, and suspicious beverages seemed a fair price to pay for a safe place to call home, and for a group of people who, if not exactly friends, were at least companions for as long as they wished to stay.

The days passed, and the island remained a safe if bland place for the siblings. Violet would have liked to spend her days assisting the islanders in the building of the enormous outrigger, but at Ishmael's suggestion she assisted Friday, Robinson, and Professor Fletcher with the colony's laundry, and spent most of her time at the saltwater falls, washing everyone's robes and laying them out on rocks to dry in the sun. Klaus would have enjoyed walking over the brae to catalog all of the detritus the colonists had collected while storm scavenging, but everyone had agreed with the facilitator's idea that the middle Baudelaire would stay at Ishmael's side at all times, so he spent his days piling clay on the old man's feet, and running to refill his seashell with cordial.

Only Sunny was allowed to do something in her area of expertise, but assisting Mrs. Caliban with the cooking was not very interesting, as the colony's three meals were very easy to prepare. Every morning, the youngest Baudelaire would retrieve the seaweed that Alonso and Ariel had harvested from the sea, after it had been rinsed by Sherman and Robinson and laid out to dry by Erewhon and Weyden, and simply throw it into a bowl for breakfast. In the afternoon, Ferdinand and Larsen would bring an enormous pile of fish they had captured in the colony's nets, so Sunny and Mrs. Caliban could mush it into ceviche with their runcible spoons, and in the evening the two chefs would light a fire and slowly simmer a pot of wild onions Omeros and Finn had picked, along with wild grasses reaped by Brewster and Calypso that served as dinner's only spice, and serve the soup alongside seashells full of the coconut cordial Byam and Willa had fermented from coconuts Mr. Pitcairn and Ms. Marlow had gathered from the island's coconut trees. None of these recipes was very challenging to prepare, and Sunny ended up spending much of her day in idleness, a word which here means "lounging around with Mrs. Caliban, sipping coconut cordial and staring at the sea."

After so many frantic encounters and tragic experiences, the children were not accustomed to leading such a calm life, and for the first few days they felt a bit restless without the treachery of Count Olaf and his sinister mysteries, and the integrity of V.F.D. and its noble deeds, but with every good night's sleep in the breezy comfort of a tent, and every day's work at easy tasks, and every sip of the sweet coconut cordial, the strife and treachery of the children's lives felt farther and farther away. After a few days, another storm arrived, just as Ishmael had predicted, and as the sky blackened and the island was covered in wind and rain, the Baudelaires huddled with the other islanders in the facilitator's tent, and they were grateful for their uneventful life on the colony, rather than the stormy existence they had endured since their parents had died.

"Janiceps," Sunny said to her siblings the next morning, as the Baudelaires walked along the coastal shelf. According to custom, the islanders were all storm scavenging, and here and there on the flat horizon, poking at the detritus of the storm. By "Janiceps," the youngest Baudelaire meant "I'm of two minds about living here," an expression which means that she couldn't decide if she liked the island colony or not.

"I know what you mean," Klaus said, who was carrying Sunny on his shoulders. "Life isn't very exciting here, but at least we're not in any danger."

"I suppose we should be grateful for that," Violet said, "even though life in the colony seems quite strict."

"Ishmael keeps saying he won't force us to do anything," Klaus said, "but everything feels a bit forced anyway."

“At least they forced Olaf away,” Violet pointed out, “which is more than V.F.D. ever accomplished.”

“Diaspora,” Sunny said, which meant something like, “We live in such a distant place that the battle between V.F.D. and their enemies seems very far away.”

“The only V.F.D. around here,” Klaus said, leaning down to peer into a pool of water, “is our Very Flavorless Diet.”

Violet smiled. “Not so long ago,” she said, “we were desperate to reach the last safe place by Thursday. Now, everywhere we look is safe, and we have no idea what day it is.”

“I still miss home,” Sunny said.

“Me too,” Klaus said. “For some reason I keep missing the library at Lucky Smells Lumbermill.”

“Charles’s library?” Violet asked, with an amazed smile. “It was a beautiful room, but it only had three books. Why on earth do you miss that place?”

“Three books are better than none,” Klaus said. “The only thing I’ve read since we arrived here is my own commonplace book. I suggested to Ishmael that he could dictate a history of the colony to me, and that I’d write it down so the islanders would know about how this place came to be. Other colonists could write down their own stories, and eventually this island would have its own library. But Ishmael said that he wouldn’t force me, but he didn’t think it would be a good idea to write a book that would upset people with its descriptions of storms and castaways. I don’t want to rock the boat, but I miss my research.”

“I know what you mean,” Violet said. “I keep missing Madame Lulu’s fortune-telling tent.”

“With all those phony magic tricks?” Klaus said.

"Her inventions were pretty ridiculous," Violet admitted, "but if I had those simple mechanical materials, I think I could make a simple water filtration system. If we could manufacture fresh water, the islanders wouldn't have to drink coconut cordial all day long. But Friday said that the drinking of the cordial was inveterate."

"Nospine?" Sunny asked.

"She meant people had been drinking it for so long that they wouldn't want to stop," Violet said. "I don't want to rock the boat, but I miss working on inventions. What about you, Sunny? What do you miss?"

"Fountain," Sunny said.

"The Fowl Fountain, at the Village of Fowl Devotees?" Klaus asked.

"No," Sunny said, shaking her head. "In city."

"The Fountain of Victorious Finance?" Violet asked. "Why on earth would you miss that?"

"First swim," Sunny said, and her siblings gasped.

"You can't remember that," Klaus said.

"You were just a few weeks old," Violet said.

"I remember," Sunny said firmly, and the elder Baudelaires shook their heads in wonder. Sunny was talking about an afternoon long ago, during an unusually hot autumn in the city. The Baudelaire parents had some business to attend to, and brought along the children, promising to stop at the ice cream store on the way home. The family had arrived at the banking district, pausing to rest at the Fountain of Victorious Finance, and the Baudelaires' mother had hurried into a building with tall, curved towers poking out in all directions, while their father waited outside with the children. The hot weather made Sunny very cranky, and she began to fuss. To quiet her, the Baudelaires' father dipped her bare feet in the water, and Sunny had smiled so enthusiastically that he had begun to dunk Sunny's body, clothes and all, into the fountain, until the youngest Baudelaire was screaming with laughter. As you may know, the laughter of babies is often very contagious, and before long not only were Violet and Klaus also jumping into the fountain, but the Baudelaires' father, too, all of them laughing and laughing as Sunny grew more and more delighted. Soon the Baudelaires' mother came out of the building, and looked in astonishment for a moment at her soaking and giggling family, before putting down her pocketbook, kicking off her shoes, and joining them in the refreshing water. They laughed all the way home, each footstep a wet *squish*, and sat out on their front steps to dry in the sun. It was a wonderful day, but very long ago—so long ago Violet and Klaus had almost forgotten it themselves. But as Sunny reminded them, they could almost hear her newborn laughter, and see the incredulous looks of the bankers who were passing by.

"It's hard to believe," Violet said, "that our parents could laugh like that, when they were already involved with V.F.D. and all its troubles."

"The schism must have seemed a world away that day," Klaus said.

"And now," Sunny said, and her siblings nodded in agreement. With the morning sun blazing overhead, and the sea sparkling at the edge of the coastal shelf, their surroundings seemed as far from trouble and treachery as that afternoon in the Fountain of Victorious Finance. But trouble and treachery are rarely as far away as one thinks they are on the clearest of days. On that faraway afternoon in the banking district, for instance, trouble could be found in the corridors of the towered building, where the Baudelaires' mother was handed a weather report and a naval map that would reveal, when she studied them by candlelight that evening, far greater trouble than she had imagined, and treachery could be found just past the fountain, where a woman disguised as a pretzel vendor took a photograph of the laughing family, and slipped her camera into the coat pocket of a financial expert who was hurrying to a restaurant, where the coat-check boy would remove the camera and hide it in an enormous parfait glass of fruit that a certain playwright would order for dessert, only to have a quick-thinking waitress pretend that the cream in the zabaglione sauce had gone sour and dump the entire dish into a garbage can in the alley, where I had been sitting for hours, pretending to look for a lost puppy who was actually scurrying into the back entrance of the towered building, removing her disguise, and folding it into her handbag, and this morning on the coastal shelf was no different. The Baudelaires took a few more steps in silence, squinting into the sun, and then Sunny knocked gently on her brother's head and pointed out at the horizon. The three children looked carefully, and saw an object resting unevenly on the edge of the shelf, and this was trouble, even though it didn't look like trouble at the time. It was hard to say what it looked like, only that it was large, and square, and ragged, and the children hurried closer to get a better view. Violet led the way, stepping carefully around a few crabs snapping along the shelf, and Klaus followed behind, with Sunny still on his shoulders, and even when they reached the object they found it difficult to identify.

At first glance, the large, square, ragged object looked like a combination of everything the Baudelaires missed. It looked like a library, because the object seemed to be nothing more than stacks and stacks of books, piled neatly on top of one another in a huge cube. But it also looked like an invention, because wrapped around the cube of books, the way string is wrapped around a package, were thick straps that appeared to be made out of rubber, in varying shades of green, and on one side of the cube was affixed a large flap of battered wood. And it also looked like a fountain, as water was trickling out of it from all sides, leaking through the bloated pages of the books and splashing down to the sand of the coastal shelf. But although this was a very unusual sight, the children stared not at the cube but at something at the top of this strange contraption. It was a bare foot, hanging over the side of the cube as if there were someone sleeping on the top of all those books, and the Baudelaires could see, right on the ankle, a tattoo of an eye.

"Olaf?" Sunny asked, but her siblings shook their heads. They had seen Count Olaf's foot more times than they would like to count, and this foot was much narrower and cleaner than the villain's.

"Climb onto my back," Violet said to her brother. "Maybe we can hoist Sunny to the top."

Klaus nodded, climbed carefully onto his sister's back, and then, very slowly, stood on Violet's shoulders. The three Baudelaires stood in a trembling tower, and Sunny reached out her little hands and pulled herself up, as she had pulled herself out of the elevator shaft at 667 Dark Avenue not so long ago, and saw the woman who was lying unconscious on top of the stack of books. She was dressed in a dress of dark red velvet, which was streaked and soaked from the rain, and her hair lay sprawled behind her like a wide, tangled fan. The foot that was hanging over the side of the cube was bent a strange, wrong way, but she looked otherwise unharmed. Her eyes were closed, and her mouth was frowning, but her belly, full and round from her pregnancy, rose and fell with calm, deep breaths, and her hands, covered in long, white gloves, lay gently on her chest, as if she were comforting herself, or her child.

"Kit Snicket," Sunny called down to her siblings, her voice hushed with amazement.

"Yes?" replied a voice that was high-pitched and grating, a word which here means "irritating, and sadly familiar." From behind the cube of books, a figure stepped out to greet the children, and Sunny looked down and frowned as the tower of elder Baudelaires turned to face the person who was confronting them. This person was also wearing a talaric—a word which here means "just reaching the ankles"—dress that was streaked and soaked, although the dress was not just red but orange and yellow as well, the colors melting together as the person walked closer and closer to the children. This person was not wearing gloves, but a pile of seaweed had been arranged to resemble long hair, which cascaded hideously down this person's back, and although this person's belly was also full and round, it was full and round in an odd and unconvincing way. It would have been very unusual if the belly were genuine, because it was obvious from looking at the person's face that the person was not a woman, and pregnancy occurs very rarely in males, although the male seahorse is a creature that becomes pregnant from time to time.

But this person, stepping closer and closer to the towered elder Baudelaires and gazing angrily up at the youngest, was no seahorse, of course. If the odd cube of books was trouble, then this man was treachery, and as is so often the case with treachery, his name was Count Olaf. Violet and Klaus stared at the villain, and Sunny stared at Kit, and then the three children looked out at the horizon, where other islanders who had spotted the strange object were heading toward them. Lastly, the Baudelaire orphans looked at one another, and wondered if a schism were so very far away after all, or if they had traveled a world away only to find all the trouble and treachery of the world staring them right in the face.

CHAPTER
SIX

At this point, you may find yourself recognizing all of the sad hallmarks of the Baudelaire orphans' sad history. The word "hallmarks" refers to something's distinguishing characteristics, such as the frothy foam and loud fizz that are the hallmarks of a root beer float, or the tearstained photographs and the loud fizz that are the hallmarks of a broken heart. Certainly the Baudelaires themselves, who as far as I know have not read their own sad history, but of course are its primary participants, had a queasy feeling in their stomachs as the islanders approached them, holding various items they had found while storm scavenging. It appeared that once again, after arriving in a strange new home, Count Olaf would fool everyone with his latest disguise, and the Baudelaires would once again be in grave danger. In fact, Count Olaf's talaric disguise did not even cover the tattoo of an eye he wore on his ankle, as the islanders, living so far from the world, would not know about this notorious mark and so could be fooled even more easily. But as the colonists drew close to the cube of books where Kit Snicket lay unconscious, suddenly the Baudelaires' history went contrary to expectations, a phrase which here means "The young girl they had first met on the coastal shelf recognized Count Olaf immediately."

“That’s Olaf!” Friday cried, pointing an accusatory finger at the villain. “Why is he dressed as a pregnant woman?”

“I’m dressed as a pregnant woman because I am a pregnant woman,” Count Olaf replied, in his high-pitched, disguised voice. “My name is Kit Snicket, and I’ve been looking everywhere for these children.”

“You’re not Kit Snicket!” Mrs. Caliban cried.

“Kit Snicket is up on this pile of books,” Violet said indignantly, helping Sunny down from the top of the cube. “She’s a friend of ours, and she may be hurt, or ill. But this is Count Olaf, who is no friend of ours.”

“He’s no friend of ours, either,” Friday said, and there was a murmur of agreement from the islanders. “Just because you’ve put something inside your dress to look pregnant, and thrown a clump of seaweed on your hair to make a wig, doesn’t mean you won’t be recognized.” She turned to face the three children, who noticed for the first time that the islander had a suspicious bump under her robe, as if she, too, had hidden something under her clothing. “I hope he hasn’t been bothering you. I told him specifically to go away.”

Count Olaf glared at Friday, but then turned to try his treachery on the other islanders. “You primitive people won’t tell a pregnant woman to go away, will you?” he asked. “I’m in a very delicate condition.”

“You’re not in a very delicate condition,” said Larsen firmly. “You’re in a very transparent disguise. If Friday says you’re this Olaf person, then I’m sure you are, and you’re not welcome here, due to your unkindness.”

“I’ve never been unkind in my life,” Olaf said, running a bony hand through his seaweed. “I’m nothing but a fairly innocent maiden with my belly full of baby. It is the Baudelaires who have been unkind, along with this impostor sleeping on top of this damp library.”

“Library?” Fletcher said with a gasp. “We’ve never had a library on the island.”

"Ishmael said that a library was bound to lead to trouble," said Brewster, "so we were lucky that a book has never ended up on our shores."

"You see?" Olaf said, his orange and yellow dress rustling in the morning breeze. "That treacherous woman up there has dragged these books to your colony, just to be unkind to you poor primitive people. And the Baudelaires are friends with her! They're the ones you should abandon here, and I should be welcomed to Olaf-Land and given gifts."

"This island is not called Olaf-Land!" cried Friday. "And you're the one we abandoned!"

"This is confusing!" cried Omeros. "We need a facilitator to sort this out!"

"Omeros is right," said Calypso. "We shouldn't decide anything until we've talked to Ishmael. Come on, let's take all this detritus to Ishmael's tent."

The colonists nodded, and a few villagers walked together to the cube of books and began to push it along the shelf. It was difficult work, and the cube shuddered as it was dragged along the bumpy surface. The Baudelaires saw Kit's foot bob violently up and down and feared that their friend would fall.

"Stop," Klaus said. "It's not safe to move someone who may be seriously injured, particularly if she's pregnant."

"Klaus is right," said Dr. Kurtz. "I remember that from my days in veterinary school."

"If Muhammad will not come to the mountain," Rabbi Bligh said, using an expression that the islanders understood at once, "the mountain will come to Muhammad."

"But how can Ishmael come here?" asked Erewhon. "He couldn't walk all this way with his injured feet."

“The sheep can drag him here,” said Sherman. “We can put his chair on the sleigh. Friday, you guard Olaf and the Baudelaires, while the rest of us will go fetch our facilitator.”

“And some more coconut cordial,” said Madame Nordoff. “I’m thirsty and my seashell is almost empty.”

There was a murmur of agreement from the islanders, and they began to make their way back toward the island, still carrying all of the items they had found while scavenging. In a few minutes, the colonists were nothing more than faint shapes on the misty horizon, and the Baudelaires were alone with Count Olaf and with Friday, who took a big sip from her seashell and then smiled at the children.

“Don’t worry, Baudelaires,” the girl said, holding one hand over the bulge in her robe. “We’ll sort this out. I promise you that this terrible man will be abandoned once and for all.”

“I’m not a man,” Olaf insisted in his disguised voice. “I’m a lady with a baby inside her.”

“Pellucid theatrics,” Sunny said.

“My sister’s right,” Violet said. “Your disguise isn’t working.”

“Oh, I don’t think you’d want me to stop pretending,” the villain said. He was still talking in his ridiculous high-pitched voice, but his eyes shone brightly from behind his seaweed bangs. He reached behind him and revealed the harpoon gun, with its bright red trigger and one last harpoon ready to be fired. “If I were to say that I was Count Olaf, instead of Kit Snicket, I might begin behaving like a villain, rather than a noble person.”

“You’ve never behaved like a noble person,” Klaus said, “no matter what name you’ve been using. And that weapon doesn’t scare us. You only have one harpoon, and this island is full of people who know how wicked and unkind you are.”

“Klaus is right,” Friday said. “You might as well put your weapon down. It’s useless in a place like this.”

Count Olaf looked first at Friday, and then at the three Baudelaires, and he opened his mouth as if to say another treacherous thing in his disguised voice. But then he shut his mouth again, and glared down at the puddles of the coastal shelf. “I’m tired of wandering around here,” he muttered. “There’s nothing to eat but seaweed and raw fish, and everything valuable has been taken by all those fools in robes.”

“If you didn’t behave so horridly,” Friday said, “you could live on the island.”

The Baudelaires looked at one another nervously. Although it seemed a bit cruel to abandon Olaf on the shelf, they did not like the idea that he might be welcomed into the colony. Friday, of course, did not know the whole story of Count Olaf, and had only experienced his unkindness once, on the day she first encountered him, but the Baudelaires could not tell Friday the whole story of Olaf without telling the whole story of themselves, and they did not know what Friday would think of their own unkindnesses and treachery.

Count Olaf looked at Friday as if thinking something over. Then, with a suspicious smile, he turned to the Baudelaires and held out the harpoon gun. “I suppose you’re right,” he said. “The harpoon gun is useless in a place like this.” He was still talking in his disguised voice, and his hand caressed his false pregnancy as if there were actually a baby growing inside him.

The Baudelaires looked at Olaf and then at the weapon. The last time the children had touched the harpoon gun, the penultimate harpoon had fired and a noble man by the name of Dewey had been killed. Violet, Klaus, and Sunny would never forget the sight of Dewey sinking into the waters of the pond as he died, and looking at the villain offering them the weapon only reminded them of how dangerous and terrible the weapon was.

“We don’t want that,” Violet said.

“Obviously this is some trick of yours,” Klaus said.

“It’s no trick,” Olaf said in his high-pitched voice. “I’m giving up my villainous ways, and I want to live with you on the island. I’m sorry to hear that you don’t believe me.”

His face was very serious, as if he *were* very sorry to hear that, but his eyes were shiny and bright, the way they are when someone is telling a joke. “Fibber,” Sunny said.

“You insult me, madam,” Olaf said. “I’m as honest as the day is long.”

The villain was using an expression that is used by many people despite the fact that it scarcely means anything at all. Some days are long, such as at the height of summer, when the sun shines for a very long time, or Halloween day, which always seems to last forever until it is finally time to put on one’s costume and demand candy from strangers, and some days are short, particularly during the wintertime or when one is doing something enjoyable, such as reading a good book or following random people on the street to see where they will go, and so if someone is as honest as the day is long, they may not be honest at all. The children were relieved to see that Friday was not fooled by Olaf’s use of a vague expression, and she frowned at the villain sternly.

“The Baudelaires told me you were not to be trusted,” the young girl said, “and I can see that they spoke the truth. You’ll stay right here, Olaf, until the others arrive and we decide what to do with you.”

“I’m not Count Olaf,” Count Olaf said, “but in the meantime, could I have a sip of this coconut cordial I heard mentioned?”

“No,” Friday said, and turned her back on the villain to gaze wistfully at the cube of books. “I’ve never seen a book before,” she confessed to the Baudelaires. “I hope Ishmael thinks it’s O.K. to keep them here.”

“You’ve never seen a book?” Violet said in amazement. “Do you know how to read?”

Friday took a quick look around the coastal shelf, and then nodded her head quickly. “Yes,” she said. “Ishmael didn’t think it was a good idea to teach us, but Professor Fletcher disagreed, and held secret classes on the coastal shelf for those of us who were born on the island. From time to time, I keep in practice by sketching the alphabet in the sand with a stick, but without a library there's not much I can do. I hope Ishmael won't suggest that we let the sheep drag all these books to the arboretum."

"Even if he does, you won't have to throw them away," Klaus reminded her. "He won't force you."

"I know," Friday said with a sigh. "But when Ishmael suggests something, everybody agrees, and it's hard not to succumb to that kind of peer pressure."

"Whisk," Sunny reminded her, and took the kitchen implement out of her pocket.

Friday smiled at the youngest Baudelaire, but quickly put the item back in Sunny's pocket. "I gave you that whisk because you said you were interested in cooking," she said. "It seemed a shame to deny your interests just because Ishmael might not think a kitchen implement was appropriate. You'll keep my secret, won't you?"

"Of course," Violet said, "but it's also a shame to deny your interest in reading."

"Maybe Ishmael won't object," Friday said.

"Maybe," Klaus said, "or maybe we could try a little peer pressure of our own."

"I don't want to rock the boat," Friday said with a frown. "Ever since my father's death, my mother has wanted me to be safe, which is why we left the world far behind and decided to stay here on the island. But the older I get, it seems the more secrets I have. Professor Fletcher taught me secretly to read. Omeros taught me secretly to skip rocks, even though Ishmael says it's dangerous. I secretly gave Sunny a whisk." She reached into her robe, and smiled. "And now I have another secret, just for me. Look what I found curled up in a broken wooden crate."

Count Olaf had been glaring silently at the children, but as Friday revealed her secret he let out a shriek even more high-pitched than his fake voice. But the Baudelaire orphans did not shriek, even though Friday was holding a frightening-looking thing, as dark as a coal mine and as thick as a sewer pipe, that uncurled itself and quickly darted toward the three children. Even as the creature opened its mouth, the morning sun glinting on its sharp teeth, the Baudelaires did not shriek, but marveled that once again their history was going contrary to expectations.

"Incredi!" Sunny cried, and it was true, for the enormous snake that was wrapping itself around the Baudelaires was, incredibly, a creature they had not seen for quite some time and never thought they would see again in their lives.

"It's the Incredibly Deadly Viper!" Klaus said in amazement. "How in the world did it end up here?"

"Ishmael said that everything eventually washes up on the shores of this island," Violet said, "but I never thought I'd see this reptile again."

"Deadly?" Friday asked nervously. "Is it poisonous? It seemed friendly to me."

"It *is* friendly," Klaus reassured her. "It's one of the least deadly and most friendly creatures in the animal kingdom. Its name is a misnomer."

"How can you be sure?" Friday asked.

"We knew the man who discovered it," Violet said. "His name was Dr. Montgomery Montgomery, and he was a brilliant herpetologist."

"He was a wonderful man," Klaus said. "We miss him very much."

The Baudelaires hugged the snake, particularly Sunny, who'd had a special attachment to the playful reptile, and thought for a moment of kind Uncle Monty and the days the children had spent with him. Then, slowly, they remembered how those days had ended, and they turned to look at Count Olaf, who had slaughtered Monty as part of a treacherous plot. Count

Olaf frowned, and looked back at them. It was strange to see the villain just sitting there, shuddering at a snake, after his murderous scheme to get the orphans in his clutches. Now, so far from the world, it was as if Olaf no longer had clutches, and his murderous schemes were as useless as the harpoon gun that lay in his hands.

“I’ve always wanted to meet a herpetologist,” said Friday, who of course did not know the whole story of Monty and his murder. “The island doesn’t have an expert on snakes. There’s so much of the world I’m missing by living here.”

“The world is a wicked place,” Count Olaf said quietly, and now it was the Baudelaires who shuddered. Even with the hot sun beating down on them, and the weight of the Incredibly Deadly Viper in their laps, the children felt a chill at the villain’s words, and everyone was silent, watching the islanders approach along with the sheep, who had Ishmael in tow, a phrase which here means “dragged along on the sleigh behind them, sitting on his white chair as if he were a king, with his feet still covered in hunks of clay and his woolly beard billowing in the wind.” As the colonists and sheep walked closer and closer, the children could see that the sheep had something else in tow, too, which sat on the sleigh behind the facilitator’s chair. It was the large, ornate bird cage that had been found after the previous storm, shining in the sunlight like a small fire.

“Count Olaf,” Ishmael said in a booming voice, as soon as his chair arrived. He stared down at the villain scornfully but also carefully, as if memorizing his face.

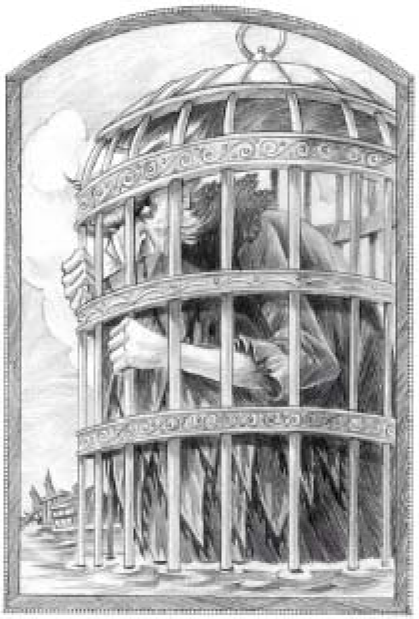
“Ishmael,” Count Olaf said, in his disguised tone.

“Call me Ish,” Ishmael said.

“Call me Kit Snicket,” Olaf said.

“I’m not going to call you anything,” Ishmael growled. “Your reign of treachery is over, Olaf.” In one swift motion, the facilitator leaned down and snatched the seaweed wig off Olaf’s head. “I’ve been told of your schemes and disguises, and we won’t stand for it. You’ll be locked up immediately.”

Jonah and Sadie lifted the bird cage from the sleigh, set it on the ground, and pushed open its door, glaring meaningfully at Count Olaf. With a nod from Ishmael, Weyden and Ms. Marlow stepped toward the villain, wrestled the harpoon gun from his hands, and dragged him toward the bird cage, as the Baudelaire orphans looked at one another, unsure exactly how they felt. On one hand, it seemed as if the children had been waiting their entire lives for someone to utter precisely the words Ishmael had uttered, and they were eager for Olaf to finally be punished for his dreadful acts, from his recent kidnapping of Justice Strauss to the time, long ago, when he had thrown Sunny into a bird cage and dangled her from his tower window. But they weren’t convinced that Count Olaf should be locked in a cage himself, even a cage as large as the one that had washed ashore. It wasn’t clear to the children if what was happening now, on the coastal shelf, was the arrival of justice at last, or just another unfortunate event. Throughout their history the Baudelaires had always hoped that Count Olaf would end up in the hands of the authorities, and would be punished by the High Court after a trial. But members of the High Court had turned out to be as corrupt and sinister as Olaf himself, and the authorities were far, far away from the island, and looking for the Baudelaires in order to charge them with arson and murder. It was difficult to say, so far from the world, how the three children felt about Count Olaf being dragged into a bird cage, but as was so often the case, it did not matter how the three children felt about it, because it happened anyway. Weyden and Ms. Marlow dragged the struggling villain to the door of the bird cage and forced him to duck inside. He snarled, and wrapped his arms around his false pregnancy, and rested his head against his knees, and hunched his back, and the Bellamy siblings shut the door of the cage and latched it securely. The villain fit in the cage, but just barely, and you had to look closely to see that the mess of limbs and hair and orange and yellow cloth was a person at all.



“This isn’t fair,” Olaf said. His voice was muffled from inside the cage, although the children noticed that he was still using a high-pitched tone, as if he could not help pretending to be Kit Snicket. “I’m an innocent pregnant woman, and these children are the real villains. You haven’t heard the whole story.”

“It depends on how you look at it,” Ishmael said firmly. “Friday told me you were unkind, and that’s all we need to hear. And this seaweed wig is all we need to see!”

“Ishmael’s right,” Mrs. Caliban said firmly. “You’ve been nothing but treacherous, Olaf, and the Baudelaires have been nothing but good!”

“‘Nothing but good,’” Olaf repeated. “Ha! Why don’t you look in the baby’s pockets if you think she’s so good. She’s hiding a kitchen implement that one of your precious islanders gave her!”

Ishmael peered down at the youngest Baudelaire from his vantage point, a phrase which here means “chair perched on a sleigh dragged by sheep.” “Is that true, Sunny?” he asked. “Are you keeping a secret from us?”

Sunny looked up at the facilitator, and then at the bird cage, remembering how uncomfortable it was to be locked up. “Yes,” she admitted, and took the whisk out of her pocket as the islanders gasped.

“Who gave this to you?” Ishmael demanded.

“Nobody gave it to her,” Klaus said quickly, not daring to look at Friday. “It’s just something that survived the storm along with us.” He reached into his pocket and brought out his commonplace book. “Each of us has something, Ishmael. I have this notebook, and my sister has a ribbon she likes to use to tie up her hair.”

There was another gasp from the assembled colonists, and Violet took the ribbon out of her pocket. “We didn’t mean any harm,” she said.

“You were told of the island’s customs,” the facilitator said sternly, “and you chose to ignore them. We were very kind to you, giving you food and clothing and shelter, and even letting you keep your glasses. And in turn, you were unkind to us.”

“They made a mistake,” Friday said, swiftly gathering the forbidden items from the Baudelaires and giving Sunny a brief and grateful look. “We’ll let the sheep take these things away, and forget all about it.”

“That seems fair,” said Sherman.

“I agree,” Professor Fletcher said.

“Me too,” Omeros said, who had picked up the harpoon gun.

Ishmael frowned, but as more and more islanders expressed their agreement, he succumbed to peer pressure and gave the orphans a small smile. “I suppose they can stay,” he said, “if they don’t rock the boat any further.” He sighed, and then suddenly frowned down at a puddle. During the conversation, the Incredibly Deadly Viper had decided to take a brief swim, and was now staring up at the facilitator from a pool of seawater.

“What is that?” Mr. Pitcairn asked, with a frightened gasp.

“It’s a friendly snake we found,” Friday said.

“Who told you it was friendly?” demanded Ferdinand.

Friday shared a quick dismayed look with the Baudelaires. After all that had happened, they knew there was no hope of convincing Ishmael that keeping the snake was a good idea. “Nobody told me,” Friday said quietly. “It just seems friendly.”

“It looks incredibly deadly,” Erewhon said with a frown. “I say we dump it in the arboretum.”

“We don’t want a snake slithering around the arboretum,” Ishmael said, stroking his beard quickly. “It might hurt the sheep. I won’t force you, but I think we should abandon it here with Count Olaf. Come along now, it’s almost lunchtime. Baudelaires, please push that cube of books to the arboretum, and—”

“Our friend shouldn’t be moved,” Violet interrupted, with a gesture to Kit’s unconscious figure. “We need to help her.”

“I didn’t realize there was a castaway up there,” Mr. Pitcairn said, peering at the bare foot that was still hanging over the side of the cube. “Look, she has the same tattoo as the villain!”

“She’s my girlfriend,” said Olaf from the bird cage. “You should either punish us both or set us both free.”

“She’s not your girlfriend!” Klaus cried. “She’s our friend, and she’s in trouble!”

“It seems that from the moment you joined us, the island is threatened with secrecy and treachery,” Ishmael said, with a weary sigh. “We’ve never had to punish anyone here before you arrived, and now there’s another suspicious person lurking around the island.”

“Dreyfuss?” Sunny said, which meant “What precisely are you accusing us of?” but the facilitator kept talking as if she had not said a word.

"I won't force you," Ishmael said, "but if you want to be a part of the safe place we've constructed, I think you should abandon this Kit Snicket person, too, even though I've never heard of her."

"We won't abandon her," Violet said. "She needs our help."

"As I said, I won't force you," Ishmael said, with one last tug on his beard. "Good-bye, Baudelaires. You can stay here on the coastal shelf with your friend and your books, if those things are so important to you."

"But what will happen to them?" asked Willa. "Decision Day is approaching, and the coastal shelf will flood with water."

"That's their problem," Ishmael said, and gave the islanders an imperious—the word "imperious," as you probably know, means "mighty and a bit snobbish"—shrug. As his shoulders raised, a small object rolled out of the sleeve of his robe and landed with a small *plop!* in a puddle, narrowly missing the bird cage where Olaf was prisoner. The Baudelaires could not identify the object, but whatever it was, it was enough to make Ishmael hurriedly clap his hands to distract anyone who might be wondering about it.

"Let's go!" he cried, and the sheep began to drag him back toward his tent. A few islanders gave the Baudelaires apologetic looks, as if they disagreed with Ishmael's suggestions but did not dare to resist the peer pressure of their fellow colonists. Professor Fletcher and Omeros, who had secrets of their own, looked particularly regretful, and Friday looked as if she might cry. She even started to say something to the Baudelaires, but Mrs. Caliban stepped forward and put her arm firmly around the girl's shoulders, and she merely gave the siblings a sad wave and walked away with her mother. The Baudelaires were too stunned for a moment to say anything. Contrary to expectations, Count Olaf had not fooled the inhabitants of this place so far from the world, and had instead been captured and punished. But still the Baudelaires were not safe, and certainly not happy to find themselves abandoned on the coastal shelf like so much detritus.

“This isn’t fair,” Klaus said finally, but he said it so quietly that the departing islanders probably did not hear. Only his sisters heard him, and the snake the Baudelaires thought they would never see again, and of course Count Olaf, who was huddled in the large, ornate bird cage like an imprisoned beast, and who was the only person to answer him.

“Life isn’t fair,” he said, in his undisguised voice, and for once the Baudelaire orphans agreed with every word the man said.

CHAPTER
Seven

The predicament of the Baudelaire orphans as they sat abandoned on the coastal shelf, with Kit Snicket unconscious at the top of the cube of books above them, Count Olaf locked in a cage alongside them, and the Incredibly Deadly Viper curled at their feet, is an excellent opportunity to use the phrase “under a cloud.” The three children were certainly under a cloud that afternoon, and not just because one lone mass of condensed water vapor, which Klaus was able to identify as being of the cumulus variety, was hanging over them in the sky like another castaway from the previous night’s storm. The expression “under a cloud” refers to people who are out of favor in a particular community, the way most classrooms have at least one child who is quite unpopular, or most secret organizations have at least one rhetorical analyst who is under suspicion. The island’s only community had certainly placed Violet, Klaus, and Sunny under a cloud, and even in the blazing afternoon sun the children felt the chill of the colony’s suspicion and disapproval.

“I can’t believe it,” Violet said. “I can’t believe we’ve been abandoned.”

"We thought we could cast away everything that happened to us before we arrived here," Klaus said, "but this place is no safer than anywhere else we've been."

"But what to do?" Sunny asked.

Violet looked around the coastal shelf. "I suppose we can catch fish and harvest seaweed to eat," she said. "Our meals won't be much different from those on the island."

"If fire," Sunny said thoughtfully, "then saltbake carp."

"We can't live here," Klaus pointed out. "Decision Day is approaching, and the coastal shelf will be underwater. We either have to live on the island, or figure out a way to get back to where we came from."

"We'll never survive a journey at sea without a boat," Violet said, wishing she had her ribbon back so she could tie up her hair.

"Kit did," Sunny pointed out.

"The library must have served as a sort of raft," Klaus said, running his hand along the books, "but she couldn't have come far on a boat of paper."

"I hope she met up with the Quagmires," Violet said.

"I hope she'll wake up and tell us what happened," Klaus said.

"Do you think she's seriously hurt?" Violet asked.

"There's no way to tell without a complete medical examination," Klaus said, "but except for her ankle, she looks all right. She's probably just exhausted from the storm."

"Worried," Sunny said sadly, wishing there was a dry, warm blanket on the coastal shelf that the Baudelaires might have used to cover their unconscious friend.

"We can't just worry about Kit," Klaus said. "We need to worry about ourselves."

"We have to think of a plan," Violet said wearily, and all three Baudelaires sighed. Even the Incredibly Deadly Viper seemed to sigh, and laid its head sympathetically on Sunny's foot. The Baudelaires stood on the coastal shelf and thought of all their previous predicaments, and all the plans they'd thought up to make themselves safe, only to end up in the midst of another unfortunate event. The cloud they were under seemed to get bigger and darker, and the children might have sat there for quite some time had not the silence been broken by the voice of the man who was locked in a bird cage.

"I have a plan," Count Olaf said. "Let me out and I'll tell you what it is."

Although Olaf was no longer using his high-pitched voice, he still sounded muffled from within the cage, and when the Baudelaires turned to look at him it was as if he were in one of his disguises. The yellow and orange dress he had been wearing covered most of him up, and the children could not see the curve of his false pregnancy or the tattoo of an eye he had on his ankle. Only a few toes and fingers extended from between the bird cage's bars, and if the siblings peered closely they could see the wet curve of his mouth, and one blinking eye staring out from his captivity.

"We're not letting you out," Violet said. "We have enough trouble without you wandering around loose."

"Suit yourself," Olaf said, and his dress rustled as he attempted to shrug. "But you'll drown as surely as I will when the coastal shelf floods. You can't build a boat, because the islanders have scavenged everything from the storm. And you can't live on the island, because the colonists have abandoned you. Even though we're shipwrecked, we're still in the same boat."

"We don't need your help, Olaf," Klaus said. "If it weren't for you, we wouldn't be here in the first place."

“Don’t be so sure of that,” Count Olaf said, and his mouth curled into a smile. “Everything eventually washes up on these shores, to be judged by that idiot in the robe. Do you think you’re the first Baudelaires to find yourselves here?”

“What you mean?” Sunny demanded.

“Let me out,” Olaf said, with a muffled chuckle, “and I’ll tell you.”

The Baudelaires looked at one another doubtfully. “You’re trying to trick us,” Violet said.

“Of course I’m trying to trick you!” Olaf cried. “That’s the way of the world, Baudelaires. Everybody runs around with their secrets and their schemes, trying to outwit everyone else. Ishmael outwitted me, and put me in this cage. But I know how to outwit him and all his islander friends. If you let me out, I can be king of Olaf-Land, and you three can be my new henchfolk.”

“We don’t want to be your henchfolk,” Klaus said. “We just want to be safe.”

“Nowhere in the world is safe,” Count Olaf said.

“Not with you around,” Violet agreed.

“I’m no worse than anyone else,” Count Olaf said. “Ishmael is just as treacherous as I am.”

“Fustianed,” Sunny said.

“It’s true!” Olaf insisted, although he probably did not understand what Sunny had said. “Look at me! I’m stuffed into a cage for no good reason! Does that sound familiar, you stupid baby?”

“My sister is not a baby,” Violet said firmly, “and Ishmael is not treacherous. He may be misguided, but he’s only trying to make the island a safe place.”

“Is that so?” Olaf said, and the cage shook as he chuckled. “Why don’t you reach into that pool, and see what Ishmael dropped into the puddle?”

The Baudelaires looked at one another. They had almost forgotten about the object that had rolled out of the facilitator’s sleeve. The three children stared down into the water, but it was the Incredibly Deadly Viper who wriggled into the murky depths of the puddle and came back with a small object in its mouth, which it deposited into Sunny’s waiting hand.

“Takk,” Sunny said, thanking the snake by scratching it on the head.

“What is it?” Violet said, leaning in to look at what the viper had retrieved.

“It’s an apple core,” Klaus said, and his sisters saw that it was so. Sunny was holding the core of an apple, which had been so thoroughly nibbled that scarcely anything remained.

“You see?” Olaf asked. “While the other islanders have to do all the work, Ishmael sneaks off to the arboretum on his perfectly healthy feet and eats all the apples for himself! Your beloved facilitator not only has clay on his feet, he has feet of clay!”

The bird cage shook with laughter, and the Baudelaire orphans looked first at the apple core and then at one another. “Feet of clay” is an expression which refers to a person who appears to be honest and true, but who turns out to have a hidden weakness or a treacherous secret. If someone turns out to have feet of clay, your opinion of them may topple, just as a statue will topple if its base turns out to be badly constructed. The Baudelaires had thought Ishmael was wrong to abandon them on the coastal shelf, of course, but they believed he had done it to keep the other islanders out of harm’s way, just as Mrs. Caliban had not wanted Friday to upset herself by learning to read, and although they did not agree with much of the facilitator’s philosophy, they at least respected the fact that he was trying to do the same thing the Baudelaires had been trying to do since that terrible day on the beach when they had first become orphans: to find or build a safe place to call home. But now, looking at the apple core, they realized what Count Olaf said was true. Ishmael had feet of clay. He was lying about his injuries, and he was selfish about the apples in the arboretum, and he was treacherous in pressuring everyone else on the island to do all the work. Gazing at the treacherous teeth marks the facilitator had left behind, they remembered his claim that he predicted the weather by magic, and the strange look in his eye when he insisted that the island had no library, and the Baudelaires wondered what other secrets the bearded facilitator was hiding. Violet, Klaus, and Sunny sank to a mound of damp sand, as if they had feet of clay themselves, and leaned against the cube of books, wondering how they could have traveled so far from the world only to find the same dishonesty and treachery they always had.

“What is your plan?” Violet asked Count Olaf, after a long silence.

“Let me out of this cage,” Olaf said, “and I’ll tell you.”

“Tell us first,” Klaus said, “and perhaps we’ll let you out.”

“Let me out first,” Olaf insisted.

“Tell us first,” Sunny insisted, just as firmly.

“I can argue with you all day,” the villain growled. “Let me out, I tell you, or I’ll take my plan to my grave!”

“We can think of a plan without you,” Violet said, hoping she sounded more confident than she felt. “We’ve managed to escape plenty of difficult situations without your help.”

“I have the only weapon that can threaten Ishmael and his supporters,” Count Olaf said.

“The harpoon gun?” Klaus said. “Omeros took that away.”

“Not the harpoon gun, you scholarly moron,” Count Olaf said contemptuously, a word which here means “while trying to scratch his nose within the confines of the bird cage.” “I’m talking about the Medusoid Mycelium!”

“Fungus!” Sunny cried. Her siblings gasped, and even the Incredibly Deadly Viper looked astonished in its reptilian way as the villain told them what you may have already guessed.

“I’m not really pregnant,” he confessed with a caged grin. “The diving helmet containing the spores of the Medusoid Mycelium is hidden in this dress I’m wearing. If you let me out, I can threaten the entire colony with these deadly mushrooms. All those robed fools will be my slaves!”

“What if they refuse?” Violet asked.

“Then I’ll smash the helmet open,” Olaf crowed, “and this whole island will be destroyed.”

“But we’ll be destroyed, too,” Klaus said. “The spores will infect us, the same as everyone else.”

“Yomhashoah,” Sunny said, which meant “Never again.” The youngest Baudelaire had already been infected by the Medusoid Mycelium not long ago, and the children did not like to think about what would have happened if they hadn’t found some wasabi to dilute the poison.

“We’ll escape on the outrigger, you fool,” Olaf said. “The island imbeciles have been building it all year. It’s perfect for leaving this place behind and heading back to where the action is.”

“Maybe they’ll just let us leave,” Violet said. “Friday said that anyone who wishes to leave the colony can climb aboard the outrigger on Decision Day.”

“That little girl hasn’t been here long,” sneered Count Olaf, “so she still believes Ishmael lets people do whatever they want. Don’t be as dumb as she is, orphans.”

Klaus wished desperately that his commonplace book was open in his lap, so he could take notes, instead of on the far side of the island, with all of the other forbidden items. “How do you know so much about this place, Olaf?” he demanded. “You’ve only been here a few days, just like us!”

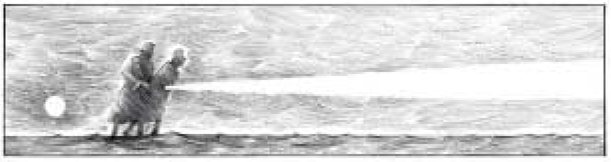
“Just like you,” the villain repeated mockingly, and the cage shook with laughter again. “Do you think your pathetic history is the only story in the world? Do you think this island has just sat here in the sea, waiting for you to wash up on its shores? Do you think that I just sat in my home in the city, waiting for you miserable orphans to stumble into my path?”

“Boswell,” Sunny said. She meant something along the lines of, “Your life doesn’t interest me,” and the Incredibly Deadly Viper seemed to hiss in agreement.

“I could tell you stories, Baudelaires,” Count Olaf said in a muffled wheeze. “I could tell you secrets about people and places that you’d never dream of. I could tell you about arguments and schisms that started before you were born. I could even tell you things about yourselves that you could never imagine. Just open the door of my cage, orphans, and I’ll tell you things you could never discover on your own.”

The Baudelaires looked at one another and shuddered. Even in broad daylight, trapped in a cage, Count Olaf was still frightening. It was as if there was something villainous that could threaten them even if it were locked up tight, far away from the rest of the world. The three siblings had always been curious children. Violet had been eager to unlock the mysteries of the mechanical world with her inventing mind since the first pair of pliers had been placed in her crib. Klaus had been keen to read everything he got his hands on since the alphabet was first printed on the wall of his bedroom by a visitor to the Baudelaire home. And Sunny was always exploring the universe through her mouth, first by biting anything that interested her, and later by tasting food carefully in order to improve her cooking skills. Curiosity was one of the Baudelaires’ most important customs, and one might think that they would be very curious indeed to hear more about the mysteries the villain had mentioned. But there was something very, very sinister about Count Olaf’s words. Listening to him talk felt like standing on the edge of a deep well, or walking on a high cliff in the dead of night, or listening to a strange rustling sound outside your bedroom window, knowing that at any moment something dangerous and enormous could happen. It made the Baudelaires think of that terrible question mark on the radar screen of the *Queequeg*—a secret so gigantic and important that it could not fit in their hearts or minds, something that had been hidden their entire lives and might destroy their entire lives once it was revealed. It was not a secret the Baudelaire orphans wanted to hear, from Count Olaf or from anyone else, and although it felt like a secret that could not be avoided, the children wanted to avoid it anyway, and without another word to the man in the cage the three siblings stood up and walked around the cube of books until they were at the far end, where Olaf and his bird cage could not be seen. Then, in silence, the three siblings sat back down, leaned against the strange raft, and stared out at the flat horizon of the sea, trying not to think about what Olaf had said. Occasionally they took sips of coconut cordial from the seashells that hung from their waists, hoping that the strong, strange drink would distract them from the strong, strange thoughts in their heads. All afternoon, until the sun set on the rippling horizon of the sea, the Baudelaire orphans sat and sipped, and wondered if they dared learn what lay at the heart of their sad lives, when every secret, every mystery, and every unfortunate event had been peeled away.

CHAPTER
Eight



Thinking about something is like picking up a stone when taking a walk, either while skipping rocks on the beach, for example, or looking for a way to shatter the glass doors of a museum. When you think about something, it adds a bit of weight to your walk, and as you think about more and more things you are liable to feel heavier and heavier, until you are so burdened you cannot take any further steps, and can only sit and stare at the gentle movements of the ocean waves or security guards, thinking too hard about too many things to do anything else. As the sun set, casting long shadows on the coastal shelf, the Baudelaire orphans felt so heavy from their thoughts they could scarcely move. They thought about the island, and the terrible storm that had brought them there, and the boat that had taken them through the storm, and their own treachery at the Hotel Denouement that had led them to escape in the boat with Count Olaf, who had stopped calling out to the Baudelaires and was now snoring loudly in the bird cage. They thought about the colony, and the cloud the islanders had put them under, and the peer pressure that had led the islanders to decide to abandon them, and the facilitator who started the peer pressure, and the secret apple core of the facilitator that seemed no different than the secret items that had gotten the Baudelaires in trouble in the first place. They thought about Kit Snicket, and the storm that had left her unconscious on top of the strange library raft, and their friends the Quagmire triplets, who may also have been caught in the same stormy sea, and Captain Widdershins's submarine that lay under the sea, and the mysterious schism that lay under everything like an enormous question mark. And the Baudelaires thought, as they did every time they saw the sky grow dark, of their parents. If you've ever lost someone, then you know that sometimes when you think of them you try to imagine where they might be, and the Baudelaires thought of how far away their mother and father seemed, while all the wickedness in the world felt so close, locked in a cage just a few feet from where the children sat. Violet thought, and Klaus thought, and Sunny thought, and as the afternoon drew to evening they felt so burdened by their thoughts that they felt they could scarcely hold another thought, and yet as the last rays of the sun disappeared on the horizon they found something else to think about, for in the darkness they heard a familiar voice, and they had to think of what to do.

"Where am I?" asked Kit Snicket, and the children heard her body rustle on the top layer of books over the snoring.

"Kit!" Violet said, standing up quickly. "You're awake!"

"It's the Baudelaires," Klaus said.

"Baudelaires?" Kit repeated faintly. "Is it really you?"

"Anais," Sunny said, which meant "In the flesh."

"Where are we?" Kit said.

The Baudelaires were silent for a moment, and realized for the first time that they did not even know the name of the place where they were. "We're on a coastal shelf," Violet said finally, although she decided not to add that they had been abandoned there.

"There's an island nearby," Klaus said. The middle Baudelaire did not explain that they were not welcome to set foot on it.

"Safe," Sunny said, but she did not mention that Decision Day was approaching, and that soon the entire area would be flooded with seawater. Without discussing the matter, the Baudelaires decided not to tell Kit the whole story, not yet.

“Of course,” Kit murmured. “I should have known I’d be here. Eventually, everything washes up on these shores.”

“Have you been here before?” Violet asked.

“No,” Kit said, “but I’ve heard about this place. My associates have told me stories of its mechanical wonders, its enormous library, and the gourmet meals the islanders prepare. Why, the day before I met you, Baudelaires, I shared Turkish coffee with an associate who was saying that he’d never had better Oysters Rockefeller than during his time on the island. You must be having a wonderful time here.”

“Janiceps,” Sunny said, restating an earlier opinion.

“I think this place has changed since your associate was here,” said Klaus.

“That’s probably true,” Kit said thoughtfully. “Thursday did say that the colony had suffered a schism, just as V.F.D. did.”

“Another schism?” Violet asked.

“Countless schisms have divided the world over the years,” Kit replied in the darkness. “Do you think the history of V.F.D. is the only story in the world? But let’s not talk of the past, Baudelaires. Tell me how you made your way to these shores.”

“The same way you did,” Violet said. “We were castaways. The only way we could leave the Hotel Denouement was by boat.”

“I knew you ran into danger there,” Kit said. “We were watching the skies. We saw the smoke and we knew you were signaling us that it wasn’t safe to join you. Thank you, Baudelaires. I knew you wouldn’t fail us. Tell me, is Dewey with you?”

Kit’s words were almost more than the Baudelaires could stand. The smoke she had seen, of course, was from the fire the children had set in the hotel’s laundry room, which had quickly spread to the entire building, interrupting Count Olaf's trial and endangering the lives of all the people inside, villains and volunteers alike. And Dewey, I'm sad to remind you, was not with the Baudelaires, but lying dead at the bottom of a pond, still clutching the harpoon that the three siblings had fired into his heart. But Violet, Klaus, and Sunny could not bring themselves to tell Kit the whole story, not now. They could not bear to tell her what had happened to Dewey, and to all the other noble people they had encountered, not yet. Not now, not yet, and perhaps not ever.

"No," Violet said. "Dewey isn't here."

"Count Olaf is with us," Klaus said, "but he's locked up."

"Viper," Sunny added.

"Oh, I'm glad Ink is safe," Kit said, and the Baudelaires thought they could almost hear her smile. "That's my special nickname for the Incredibly Deadly Viper. Ink kept me good company on this raft after we were separated from the others."

"The Quagmires?" Klaus asked. "You found them?"

"Yes," Kit said, and coughed a bit. "But they're not here."

"Maybe they'll wash up here, too," Violet said.

"Maybe," Kit said uncertainly. "And maybe Dewey will join us, too. We need as many associates as we can if we're going to return to the world and make sure that justice is served. But first, let's find this colony I've heard so much about. I need a shower and a hot meal, and then I want to hear the whole story of what happened to you." She started to lower herself down from the raft, but then stopped with a cry of pain.

"You shouldn't move," Violet said quickly, glad for an excuse to keep Kit on the coastal shelf. "Your foot's been injured."

"Both my feet have been injured," Kit corrected ruefully, lying back down on the raft. "The telegram device fell on my legs when the submarine was attacked. I need your help, Baudelaires. I need to be someplace safe."

"We'll do everything we can," Klaus said.

"Maybe help is on the way," Kit said. "I can see someone coming."

The Baudelaires turned to look, and in the dark they saw a very tiny, very bright light, skittering toward them from the west. At first the light looked like nothing more than a firefly, darting here and there on the coastal shelf, but gradually the children could see it was a flashlight, around which several figures in white robes huddled, walking carefully among the puddles and debris. The shine of the flashlight reminded Klaus of all of the nights he spent reading under the covers in the Baudelaire mansion, while outside the night made mysterious noises his parents always insisted were nothing more than the wind, even on windless evenings. Some mornings, his father would come into Klaus's room to wake him up and find him asleep, still clutching his flashlight in one hand and his book in the other, and as the flashlight drew closer and closer, the middle Baudelaire could not help but think that it was his father, walking across the coastal shelf to come to his children's aid after all this time. But of course it was not the Baudelaires' father. The figures arrived at the cube of books, and the children could see the faces of two islanders: Finn, who was holding the flashlight, and Erewhon, who was carrying a large, covered basket.

"Good evening, Baudelaires," Finn said. In the dim light of the flashlight she looked even younger than she was.

"We brought you some supper," Erewhon said, and held out the basket to the children. "We were concerned that you might be quite hungry out here."

"We are," Violet admitted. The Baudelaires, of course, wished that the islanders had expressed their concern in front of Ishmael and the others, when the colony was deciding to abandon the children on the coastal shelf, but as Finn opened the basket and the children smelled the island's customary dinner of onion soup, the children did not want to look a gift horse in the mouth, a phrase which here means "turn down an offer of a hot meal, no matter how disappointed they were in the person who was offering it."

"Is there enough for our friend?" Klaus asked. "She's regained consciousness."

"I'm glad to hear it," Finn said. "There's enough food for everyone."

"As long as you keep the secret of our coming here," Erewhon said. "Ishmael might not think it was proper."

"I'm surprised he doesn't forbid the use of flashlights," Violet said, as Finn handed her a coconut shell full of steaming soup.

"Ishmael doesn't forbid anything," Finn said. "He'd never force me to throw this flashlight away. However, he did suggest that I let the sheep take it to the arboretum. Instead I slipped it into my robe, as a secret, and Madame Nordoff has been secretly supplying me with batteries in exchange for my secretly teaching her how to yodel, which Ishmael says might frighten the other islanders."

"And Mrs. Caliban secretly slipped me this picnic basket," Erewhon said, "in exchange for my secretly teaching her the backstroke, which Ishmael says is not the customary way to swim."

"Mrs. Caliban?" said Kit, in the darkness. "Miranda Caliban is here?"

"Yes," Finn said. "Do you know her?"

"I know her husband," Kit said. "He and I stood together in a time of great struggle, and we're still very good friends."

"Your friend must be a little confused after her difficult journey," Erewhon said to the Baudelaires, standing on tiptoes so she could hand Kit some soup. "Mrs. Caliban's husband perished many years ago in the storm that brought her here."

"That's impossible," Kit said, reaching down to take the bowl from the young girl. "I just had Turkish coffee with him."

"Mrs. Caliban is not the sort to keep secrets," Finn said. "That's why she lives on the island. It's a safe place, far from the treachery of the world."

"Enigmorama," Sunny said, putting her coconut shell of soup on the ground so she could share it with the Incredibly Deadly Viper.

"My sister means that it seems this island has plenty of secrets," Klaus said, thinking wistfully of his commonplace book and all the secrets its pages contained.

"I'm afraid we have one more secret to discuss," Erewhon said. "Turn the flashlight off, Finn. We don't want to be seen from the island."

Finn nodded, and turned the flashlight off. The Baudelaires had one last glimpse of each other before the darkness engulfed them, and for a moment everyone stood in silence, as if afraid to speak.

Many, many years ago, when even the great-great-grandparents of the oldest person you know were not even day-old infants, and when the city where the Baudelaires were born was nothing more than a handful of dirt huts, and the Hotel Denouement nothing but an architectural sketch, and the faraway island had a name, and was not considered very faraway at all, there was a group of people known as the Cimmerians. They were a nomadic people, which meant that they traveled constantly, and they often traveled at night, when the sun would not give them sunburn and when the coastal shelves in the area in which they lived were not flooded with water. Because they traveled in shadows, few people ever got a good look at the Cimmerians, and they were considered sneaky and mysterious people, and to this day things done in the dark tend to have a somewhat sinister reputation. A man digging a hole in his backyard during the afternoon, for instance, looks like a gardener, but a man digging a hole at night looks like he's burying some terrible secret, and a woman who gazes out of her window in the daytime appears to be enjoying the view, but looks more like a spy if she waits until nightfall. The nighttime digger may actually be planting a tree to surprise his niece while the niece giggles at him from the window, and the morning window watcher may actually be planning to blackmail the so-called gardener as he buries the evidence of his vicious crimes, but thanks to the Cimmerians, the darkness makes even the most innocent of activities seem suspicious, and so in the darkness of the coastal shelf, the Baudelaires suspected that the question Finn asked was a sinister one, even though it could have been something one of their teachers might have asked in the classroom.

“Do you know the meaning of the word ‘mutiny’?” she asked, in a calm, quiet voice.

Violet and Sunny knew that Klaus would answer, although they were pretty sure themselves what the word meant. “A mutiny is when a group of people take action against a leader.”

“Yes,” Finn said. “Professor Fletcher taught me the word.”

“We are here to tell you that a mutiny will take place at breakfast,” said Erewhon. “More and more colonists are getting sick and tired of the way things are going on the island, and Ishmael is the root of the trouble.”

“Tuber?” Sunny asked.

“‘Root of the trouble’ means ‘the cause of the islanders’ problems,’” Klaus explained.

“Exactly,” Erewhon said, “and when Decision Day arrives we will finally have the opportunity to get rid of him.”

“Rid of him?” Violet repeated, the phrase sounding sinister in the dark.

“We’re going to force him aboard the outrigger right after breakfast,” Erewhon said, “and push him out to sea as the coastal shelf floods.”

“A man traveling the ocean alone is unlikely to survive,” Klaus said.

“He won’t be alone,” Finn said. “A number of islanders support Ishmael. If necessary, we’ll force them to leave the island as well.”

“How many?” Sunny asked.

“It’s hard to know who supports Ishmael and who doesn’t,” Erewhon said, and the children heard the old woman sip from her seashell. “You’ve seen how he acts. He says he doesn’t force anyone, but everyone ends up agreeing with him anyway. But no longer. At breakfast we’ll find out who supports him and who doesn’t.”

“Erewhon says we’ll fight all day and all night if we have to,” Finn said. “Everyone will have to choose sides.”

The children heard an enormous, sad sigh from the top of the raft of books. “A schism,” Kit said quietly.

“Gesundheit,” Erewhon said. “That’s why we’ve come to you, Baudelaires. We need all the help we can get.”

“After the way Ishmael abandoned you, we figured you’d be on our side,” Finn said. “Don’t you agree he’s the root of the trouble?”

The Baudelaires stood together in the silence, thinking about Ishmael and all they knew about him. They thought of the way he had taken them in so kindly upon their arrival on the island, but also how quickly he had abandoned them on the coastal shelf. They thought about how eager he had been to keep the Baudelaires safe, but also how eager he was to lock Count Olaf in a bird cage. They thought about his dishonesty about his injured feet, and about his secret apple eating, but as the children thought of all they knew about the facilitator, they also thought about how much they didn’t know, and after hearing both Count Olaf and Kit Snicket talk about the history of the island, the Baudelaire orphans realized they did not know the whole story. The children might agree that Ishmael was the root of the trouble, but they could not be sure.

“I don’t know,” Violet said.

“You don’t know?” Erewhon repeated incredulously. “We brought you supper, and Ishmael left you out here to starve, and you don’t know whose side you’re on?”

“We trusted you when you said Count Olaf was a terrible person,” Finn said. “Why can’t you trust us, Baudelaires?”

“Forcing Ishmael to leave the island seems a bit drastic,” Klaus said.

“It’s a bit drastic to put a man in a cage,” Erewhon pointed out, “but I didn’t hear you complaining then.”

“Quid pro quo?” Sunny asked.

“If we help you,” Violet translated, “will you help Kit?”

“Our friend is injured,” Klaus said. “Injured and pregnant.”

“And distraught,” Kit added weakly, from the top of the raft.

“If you help us in our plan to defeat Ishmael,” Finn promised, “we’ll get her to a safe place.”

“And if not?” Sunny asked.

“We won’t force you, Baudelaires,” Erewhon said, sounding like the facilitator she wanted to defeat, “but Decision Day is approaching, and the coastal shelf will flood. You need to make a choice.”

The Baudelaires did not say anything, and for a moment everyone stood in a silence broken only by Count Olaf’s snores. Violet, Klaus, and Sunny were not interested in being part of a schism, after witnessing all of the misery that followed the schism of V.F.D., but they did not see a way to avoid it. Finn had said that they needed to make a choice, but choosing between living alone on a coastal shelf, endangering themselves and their injured friend, and participating in the island’s mutinous plan, did not feel like much of a choice at all, and they wondered how many other people had felt this way, during the countless schisms that had divided the world over the years.

“We’ll help you,” Violet said finally. “What do you want us to do?”

“We need you to sneak into the arboretum,” Finn said. “You mentioned your mechanical abilities, Violet, and Klaus seems very well-read. All of the forbidden items we’ve scavenged over the years should come in very handy indeed.”

“Even the baby should be able to cook something up,” Erewhon said.

“But what do you mean?” Klaus asked. “What should we do with all the detritus?”

“We need weapons, of course,” Erewhon said in the darkness.

“We hope to force Ishmael off the island peacefully,” Finn said quickly, “but Erewhon says we’ll need weapons, just in case. Ishmael will notice if we go to the far side of the island, but you three should be able to sneak over the brae, find or build some weapons in the arboretum, and bring them to us here before breakfast so we can begin the mutiny.”

“Absolutely not!” cried Kit, from the top of the raft. “I won’t hear of you putting your talents to such nefarious use, Baudelaires. I’m sure the island can solve its difficulties without resorting to violence.”

“Did you solve your difficulties without resorting to violence?” Erewhon asked sharply. “Is that how you survived the great struggle you mentioned, and ended up shipwrecked on a raft of books?”

“My history is not important,” Kit replied. “I’m worried about the Baudelaires.”

“And we’re worried about you, Kit,” Violet said. “We need as many associates as we can if we’re going to return to the world and make sure that justice is served.”

“You need to be in a safe place to recuperate from your injury,” Klaus said.

“And baby,” said Sunny.

“That’s no reason to engage in treachery,” Kit said, but she did not sound so sure. Her voice was weak and faint, and the children heard the books rustling as she moved her injured feet uncomfortably.

“Please help us,” Finn said, “and we’ll help your friend.”

“There must be a weapon that can threaten Ishmael and his supporters,” Erewhon said, and now she did not sound like Ishmael. The Baudelaires had heard almost the exact same words from the imprisoned mouth of Count Olaf, and they shuddered to think of the weapon he was hiding in the bird cage.

Violet put down her empty soup bowl, and picked up her baby sister, while Klaus took the flashlight from the old woman. “We’ll be back as soon as we can, Kit,” the eldest Baudelaire promised. “Wish us luck.”

The raft trembled as Kit uttered a long, sad sigh. “Good luck,” she said finally. “I wish things were different, Baudelaires.”

“So do we,” Klaus replied, and the three children followed the narrow beam of the flashlight back toward the colony that had abandoned them. Their footsteps made small splashes on the coastal shelf, and the Baudelaires heard the quiet slither of the Incredibly Deadly Viper, loyally following them on their errand. There was no sign of a moon, and the stars were covered in clouds that remained from the passing storm, or perhaps were heralding a new one, so the entire world seemed to vanish outside the secret flashlight’s forbidden light. With each damp and uncertain step, the children felt heavier, as if their thoughts were stones that they had to carry to the arboretum, where all the forbidden items lay waiting for them. They thought about the islanders, and the mutinous schism that would soon divide the colony in two. They thought about Ishmael, and wondered whether his secrets and deceptions meant that he deserved to be at sea. And they thought about the Medusoid Mycelium, fermenting in the helmet in Olaf’s grasp, and wondered if the islanders would discover that weapon before the Baudelaires built another. The children traveled in the dark, just as so many other people had done before them, from the nomadic travels of the Cimmerians to the desperate voyages of the Quagmire triplets, who at that very moment were in circumstances just as dark although quite a bit damper than the Baudelaires’, and as the children drew closer and closer to the island that had abandoned them, their thoughts made them heavier and heavier, and the Baudelaire orphans wished things were very different indeed.

CHAPTER
Nine

The phrase “in the dark,” as I’m sure you know, can refer not only to one’s shadowy surroundings, but also to the shadowy secrets of which one might be unaware. Every day, the sun goes down over all these secrets, and so everyone is in the dark in one way or another. If you are sunbathing in a park, for instance, but you do not know that a locked cabinet is buried fifty feet beneath your blanket, then you are in the dark even though you are not actually in the dark, whereas if you are on a midnight hike, knowing full well that several ballerinas are following close behind you, then you are not in the dark even if you are in fact in the dark. Of course, it is quite possible to be in the dark in the dark, as well as to be not in the dark not in the dark, but there are so many secrets in the world that it is likely that you are always in the dark about one thing or another, whether you are in the dark in the dark or in the dark not in the dark, although the sun can go down so quickly that you may be in the dark about being in the dark in the dark, only to look around and find yourself no longer in the dark about being in the dark in the dark, but in the dark in the dark nonetheless, not only because of the dark, but because of the ballerinas in the dark, who are not in the dark about the dark, but also not in the dark about the locked cabinet, and you may be in the dark about the ballerinas digging up the locked cabinet in the dark, even though you are no longer in the dark about being in the dark, and so you are in fact in the dark about being in the dark, even though you are not in the dark about being in the dark, and so you may fall into the hole that the ballerinas have dug, which is dark, in the dark, and in the park.

The Baudelaire orphans, of course, had been in the dark many times before they made their way in the dark over the brae to the far side of the island, where the arboretum guarded its many, many secrets. There was the darkness of Count Olaf's gloomy house, and the darkness of the movie theater where Uncle Monty had taken them to see a wonderful film called *Zombies in the Snow*. There were the dark clouds of Hurricane Herman as it roared across Lake Lachrymose, and the darkness of the Finite Forest as a train had taken the children to work at Lucky Smells Lumbermill. There were the dark nights the children spent at Prufrock Preparatory School, participating in Special Orphan Running Exercises, and the dark climbs up the elevator shaft of 667 Dark Avenue. There was the dark jail cell in which the children spent some time while living in the Village of Fowl Devotees, and the dark trunk of Count Olaf's car, which had carried them from Heimlich Hospital to the hinterlands, where the dark tents of the Caligari Carnival awaited them. There was the dark pit they had built high in the Mortmain Mountains, and the dark hatch they had climbed through in order to board the *Queequeg*, and the dark lobby of the Hotel Denouement, where they thought their dark days might be over. There were the dark eyes of Count Olaf and his associates, and the dark notebooks of the Quagmire triplets, and all of the dark passageways the children had discovered, that led to the Baudelaire mansion, and out of the Library of Records, and up to the V.F.D. Headquarters, and to the dark, dark depths of the sea, and all the dark passageways they hadn't discovered, where other people traveled on equally desperate errands. But most of all, the Baudelaire orphans had been in the dark about their own sad history. They did not understand how Count Olaf had entered their lives, or how he had managed to remain there, hatching scheme after scheme without anyone stopping him. They did not understand V.F.D., even when they had joined the organization themselves, or how the organization, with all of its codes, errands, and volunteers, had failed to defeat the wicked people who seemed to triumph again and again, leaving each safe place in ruins. And they did not understand how they could lose their parents and their home in a fire, and how this enormous injustice, this bad beginning to their sad history, was followed only by another injustice, and another, and another. The Baudelaire orphans did not understand how injustice and treachery could prosper, even this far from their home, on an island in the middle of a vast sea, and that happiness and innocence—the happiness and innocence of that day on Briny Beach, before Mr. Poe brought them the dreadful news—could always be so far out of reach. The Baudelaires were in the dark about the mystery of their own lives, which is why it was such a profound shock to think at last that these mysteries might be solved. The Baudelaire orphans blinked in the rising sun, and gazed at the expanse of the arboretum, and wondered if they might not be in the dark any longer.

"Library" is another word that can mean two different things, which means even in a library you cannot be safe from the confusion and mystery of the world. The most common use of the word "library," of course, refers to a collection of books or documents, such as the libraries the Baudelaires had encountered during their travels and troubles, from the legal library of Justice Strauss to the Hotel Denouement, which was itself an enormous library—with, it turned out, another library hidden nearby. But the word "library" can also refer to a mass of knowledge or a source of learning, just as Klaus Baudelaire is something of a library with the mass of knowledge stored in his brain, or Kit Snicket, who was a source of learning for the Baudelaires as she told them about V.F.D. and its noble errands. So when I write that the Baudelaire orphans had found themselves in the largest library they had ever seen, it is that definition of the word I am using, because the arboretum was an enormous mass of knowledge, and a source of learning, even without a single scrap of paper in sight. The items that had washed up on the shores of the island over the years could answer any question the Baudelaires had, and thousands more questions they'd never thought of. Stretched out as far as the eye could see were piles of objects, heaps of items, towers of evidence, bales of materials, clusters of details, stacks of substances, hordes of pieces, arrays of articles, constellations of details, galaxies of stuff, and universes of things—an accumulation, an aggregation, a compilation, a concentration, a crowd, a herd, a flock, and a register of seemingly everything on Earth. There was everything the alphabet could hold—automobiles and alarm clocks, bandages and beads, cables and chimneys, discs and dominos, earmuffs and emery boards, fiddles and fabric, garrotes and glassware, hangers and husks, icons and instruments, jewelry and jogging shoes, kites and kernels, levers and lawn chairs, machines and magnets, noisemakers and needles, orthodontics and ottomans, pull toys and pillars, quarters and quivers, race cars and rucksacks, saws and skulls, teaspoons and ties, urns and ukuleles, valentines and vines, wigs and wires, xeranthemums and xylorimbas, yachts and yokes, zithers and zabras, a word which here means "small boats usually used off the coasts of Spain and Portugal"—as well as everything that could hold the alphabet, from a cardboard box perfect for storing twenty-six wooden blocks, to a chalkboard perfect for writing twenty-six letters. There were any number of things, from a single motorcycle to countless chopsticks, and things with every number on them, from license plates to calculators. There were objects from every climate, from snowshoes to ceiling fans; and for every occasion, from menorahs to soccer balls; and there were things you could use on certain occasions in certain climates, such as a waterproof fondue set. There were inserts and outhouses, overpasses and underclothes, upholstery and down comforters, hotplates and cold creams and cradles and coffins, hopelessly destroyed, somewhat damaged, in slight disrepair, and brand-new. There were objects the Baudelaires recognized, including a triangular picture frame and a brass lamp in the shape of a fish, and there were objects the Baudelaires had never seen before, including the skeleton of an elephant and a glittering green mask one might wear as part of a dragonfly costume, and there were objects the Baudelaires did not know if they had seen before, such as a wooden rocking horse and a piece of rubber that looked like a fan belt. There were items that seemed to be part of the Baudelaires' story, such as a plastic replica of a clown and a broken telegraph pole, and there were items that seemed part of some other story, such as a carving of a black bird and a gem that shone like an Indian moon, and all the items, and all their stories, were scattered across the landscape in such a way that the Baudelaire orphans thought that the arboretum had either been organized according to principles so mysterious they could not be discovered, or it had not been organized at all. In short, the Baudelaire orphans had found themselves in the largest library they had ever seen, but they did not know where to begin their research. The children stood in awed silence and surveyed the endless landscape of objects and stories, and then looked up at the largest object of all, which towered over the arboretum and covered it in shade. It was the apple tree, with a trunk as enormous as a mansion and branches as long as a city street, which sheltered the library from the frequent storms and offered its bitter apples to anyone who dared to pick one.

“Words fail me,” Sunny said in a hushed whisper.

“Me, too,” Klaus agreed. “I can’t believe what we’re seeing. The islanders told us that everything eventually washes up on these shores, but I never imagined the arboretum would hold so many things.”

Violet picked up an item that lay at her feet—a pink ribbon decorated with plastic daisies—and began to wind it around her hair. To those who hadn’t been around Violet long, nothing would have seemed unusual, but those who knew her well knew that when she tied her hair up in a ribbon to keep it out of her eyes, it meant that the gears and levers of her inventing brain were whirring at top speed. “Think of what I could build here,” she said. “I could build splints for Kit’s feet, a boat to take us off the island, a filtration system so we could drink fresh water….” Her voice trailed off, and she stared up at the branches of the tree. “I could invent anything and everything.”

Klaus picked up the object at his feet—a cape made of scarlet silk—and held it in his hands. “There must be countless secrets in a place like this,” he said. “Even without a book, I could investigate anything and everything.”

Sunny looked around her. “Service à la Russe,” she said, which meant something like, “Even with the simplest of ingredients, I could prepare an extremely elaborate meal.”

“I don’t know where to begin,” Violet said, running a hand along a pile of broken white wood that looked like it had once been part of a gazebo.

“We begin with weapons,” Klaus said grimly. “That’s why we’re here. Erewhon and Finn are waiting for us to help them mutiny against Ishmael.”

The oldest Baudelaire shook her head. “It doesn’t seem right,” she said. “We can’t use a place like this to start a schism.”

“Maybe a schism is necessary,” Klaus said. “There are millions of items here that could help the colony, but thanks to Ishmael, they’ve all been abandoned here.”

“No one forced anyone to abandon anything,” Violet said.

“Peer pressure,” Sunny pointed out.

“We can try a little peer pressure of our own,” Violet said firmly. “We’ve defeated worse people than Ishmael with far fewer materials.”

“But do we really want to defeat Ishmael?” Klaus asked. “He’s made the island a safe place, even if it is a little boring, and he kept Count Olaf away, even if he is a little cruel. He has feet of clay, but I’m not sure he’s the root of the problem.”

“What is the root of the problem?” Violet asked.

“Ink,” Sunny said, but when her siblings turned to give her a quizzical look, they saw that the youngest Baudelaire was not answering their question, but pointing at the Incredibly Deadly Viper, who was slithering hurriedly away from the children with its eyes darting this way and that and its tongue extended to sniff the air.

“It appears to know where it’s going,” Violet said.

“Maybe it’s been here before,” Klaus said.

“Taylit,” Sunny said, which meant “Let’s follow the reptile and see where it heads.” Without waiting to see whether her siblings agreed, she hurried after the snake, and Violet and Klaus hurried after her. The viper’s path was as curved and twisted as the snake itself, and the Baudelaires found themselves scrambling over all sorts of discarded items, from a cardboard box, soaked through from the storm, that was full of something white and lacy, to a painted backdrop of a sunset, such as might be used in the performance of an opera. The children could tell that the path had been traveled before, as the ground was covered in footprints. The snake was slithering so quickly that the Baudelaires could not keep up, but they could follow the footprints, which were dusted around the edges in white powder. It was dried clay, of course, and in moments the children reached the end of the path, following in Ishmael's footsteps, and they arrived at the base of the apple tree just in time to see the tail of the snake disappear into a gap in the tree's roots. If you've ever stood at the base of an old tree, then you know the roots are often close to the surface of the earth, and the curved angles of the roots can create a hollow space in the tree's trunk. It was into this hollow space that the Incredibly Deadly Viper disappeared, and after the tiniest of pauses, it was into this space that the Baudelaire orphans followed, wondering what secrets they would find at the root of the tree that sheltered such a mysterious place. First Violet, and then Klaus, and then Sunny stepped down through the gap into the secret space. It was dark underneath the roots of the tree, and for a moment the Baudelaires tried to adjust to the gloom and figure out what this place was, but then the middle Baudelaire remembered the flashlight, and turned it on so he and his siblings would no longer be in the dark in the dark.

The Baudelaire orphans were standing in a space much bigger than they would have imagined, and much better furnished. Along one wall was a large stone bench lined with simple, clean tools, including several sharp-looking razor-blades, a glass pot of paste, and several wooden brushes with narrow, fine tips. Next to the wall was an enormous bookcase, which was stuffed with books of all shapes and sizes, as well as assorted documents that were stacked, rolled, and stapled with extreme care. The shelves of the bookcase stretched away from the children past the beam of the flashlight and disappeared into the darkness, so there was no way of knowing how long the bookcase was, or the number of books and documents it contained. Opposite the bookcase stretched an elaborate kitchen, with a huge potbellied stove, several porcelain sinks, and a tall, humming refrigerator, as well as a square wooden table covered in appliances ranging from a blender to a fondue set. Over the table hung a rack from which dangled all manner of kitchen utensils and pots, as well as sprigs of dried herbs, a variety of whole dried fish, and even a few cured meats, such as salami and prosciutto, an Italian ham that the Baudelaire orphans had once enjoyed at a

Sicilian picnic the family had attended. Nailed to the wall was an impressive spice rack filled with jars of herbs and bottles of condiments, and a cupboard with glass doors through which the children could see piles of plates, bowls, and mugs. Finally, in the center of this enormous space were two large, comfortable reading chairs, one with a gigantic book on the seat, much taller than an atlas and much thicker than even an unabridged dictionary, and the other just waiting for someone to sit down. Lastly, there was a curious device made of brass that looked like a large tube with a pair of binoculars at the bottom, which rose up into the thick canopy of roots that formed the ceiling. As the Incredibly Deadly Viper hissed proudly, the way a dog might wag its tail after performing a difficult trick, the three children stared around the room, each concentrating on their area of expertise, a phrase which here means "the part of the room in which each Baudelaire would most like to spend time."

Violet walked over to the brass device and peered into the eyes of the binoculars. "I can see the ocean," she said in surprise. "This is an enormous periscope, much bigger than the one in the *Queequeg*. It must run all the way up the trunk of the tree and jut out over the highest branch."

"But why would you want to look at the ocean from here?" Klaus asked.

"From this height," Violet explained, "you could see any storm clouds that might be heading this way. This is how Ishmael predicts the weather—not by magic, but with scientific equipment."

"And these tools are used to repair books," Klaus said. "Of course books wash up on the island—everything does, eventually. But the pages and bindings of the books are often damaged by the storm that brought them, so Ishmael repairs them and shelves them here." He picked up a dark blue notebook from the bench and held it up. "It's my commonplace book," he said. "He must have been making sure none of the pages were wet."

Sunny picked up a familiar object from the wooden table—her whisk—and held it to her nose. "Fritters," she said. "With cinnamon."

“Ishmael walks to the arboretum to watch for storms, read books, and cook spiced food,” Violet said. “Why would he pretend to be an injured facilitator who predicts the weather through magic, claims that the island has no library, and prefers bland meals?”

Klaus walked to the two reading chairs and lifted the heavy, thick book. “Maybe this will tell us,” he said, and shone the flashlight so his sisters could see the long, somewhat wordy title printed on the front cover.

“What does it mean?” Violet asked. “That title could mean anything.”

Klaus noticed a thin piece of black cloth stuck in the book to mark someone’s place, and opened the book to that page. The bookmark was Violet’s hair ribbon, which the eldest Baudelaire quickly grabbed, as the pink ribbon with plastic daisies was not to her taste. “I think it’s a history of the island,” Klaus said, “written like a diary. Look, here’s what the most recent entry says: ‘Yet another figure from the shadowy past has washed ashore—Kit Snicket (see page667). Convinced the others to abandon her, and the Baudelaires, who have already rocked the boat far too much, I fear. Also managed to have Count Olaf locked in a cage. Note to self: Why won’t anyone call me Ish?’”

“Ishmael said he’d never heard of Kit Snicket,” Violet said, “but here he writes that she’s a figure from the shadowy past.”

“Six six seven,” Sunny said, and Klaus nodded. Handing the flashlight to his older sister, he quickly turned the pages of the book, flipping back in history until he reached the page Ishmael had mentioned.

“‘Inky has learned to lasso sheep,’” Klaus read, “‘and last night’s storm washed up a postcard from Kit Snicket, addressed to Olivia Caliban. Kit, of course, is the sister of…’”

The middle Baudelaire’s voice trailed off, and his sisters stared at him curiously. “What’s wrong, Klaus?” Violet asked. “That entry doesn’t seem particularly mysterious.”

“It’s not the entry,” Klaus said, so quietly that Violet and Sunny could scarcely hear him. “It’s the handwriting.”

“Familia?” Sunny asked, and all three Baudelaires stepped as close as they could to one another. In silence, the children gathered around the beam of the flashlight, as if it were a warm campfire on a freezing night, and gazed down at the pages of the oddly titled book. Even the Incredibly Deadly Viper crawled up to perch on Sunny’s shoulders, as if it were as curious as the Baudelaire orphans to know who had written those words so long ago.

“Yes, Baudelaires,” said a voice from the far end of the room. “That’s your mother’s handwriting.”

CHAPTER
Ten

Ishmael stepped out of the darkness, running a hand along the shelves of the bookcase, and walked slowly toward the Baudelaire orphans. In the dim glow of the flashlight, the children could not tell if the facilitator was smiling or frowning through his wild, woolly beard, and Violet was reminded of something she'd almost entirely forgotten. A long time ago, before Sunny was born, Violet and Klaus had begun an argument at breakfast over whose turn it was to take out the garbage. It was a silly matter, but one of those occasions when the people arguing are having too much fun to stop, and all day, the two siblings had wandered around the house, doing their assigned chores and scarcely speaking to each other. Finally, after a long, silent meal, during which their parents tried to get them to reconcile—a word which here means "admit that it didn't matter in the slightest whose turn it was, and that the only important thing was to get the garbage out of the kitchen before the smell spread to the entire mansion"—Violet and Klaus were sent up to bed without dessert or even five minutes of reading. Suddenly, just as she was dropping off to sleep, Violet had an idea for an invention that meant no one would ever have to take out the garbage, and she turned on a light and began to sketch out her idea on a pad of paper. She became so interested in her invention that she did not listen for footsteps in the hallway outside, and so when her mother opened the door, she did not have time to turn out the light and pretend to be asleep. Violet stared at her mother, and her mother stared back, and in the dim light the eldest Baudelaire could not see if her mother was smiling or frowning—if she was angry at Violet for staying up past her bedtime, or if she didn't mind after all. But then finally, Violet saw that her mother was carrying a cup of hot tea. "Here you go, dear," she said gently. "I know how star anise tea helps you think." Violet took the steaming cup from her mother, and in that instant she suddenly realized that it had been her turn to take out the garbage after all.

Ishmael did not offer the Baudelaire orphans any tea, and when he flicked a switch on the wall, and lit up the secret space underneath the apple tree with electric lights, the children could see that he was neither smiling nor frowning, but exhibiting a strange combination of the two, as if he were as nervous about the Baudelaires as they were about him. "I knew you'd come here," he said finally, after a long silence. "It's in your blood. I've never known a Baudelaire who didn't rock the boat."

The Baudelaires felt all of their questions bump into each other in their heads, like frantic sailors deserting a sinking ship. "What is this place?" Violet asked. "How did you know our parents?"

"Why have you lied to us about so many things?" Klaus demanded. "Why are you keeping so many secrets?"

"Who are you?" Sunny asked.

Ishmael took another step closer to the Baudelaires and gazed down at Sunny, who gazed back at the facilitator, and then stared down at the clay still packed around his feet. "Did you know I used to be a schoolteacher?" he asked. "This was many years ago, in the city. There were always a few children in my chemistry classes who had the same gleam in their eyes that you Baudelaires have. Those students always turned in the most interesting assignments." He sighed, and sat down on one of the reading chairs in the center of the room. "They also always gave me the most trouble. I remember one child in particular, who had scraggly dark hair and just one eyebrow."

"Count Olaf," Violet said.

Ishmael frowned, and blinked at the eldest Baudelaire. “No,” he said. “This was a little girl. She had one eyebrow and, thanks to an accident in her grandfather’s laboratory, only one ear. She was an orphan, and she lived with her siblings in a house owned by a terrible woman, a violent drunkard who was famous for having killed a man in her youth with nothing but her bare hands and a very ripe cantaloupe. The cantaloupe was grown on a farm that is no longer in operation, the Lucky Smells Melon Farm, which was owned by—”

“Sir,” Klaus said.

Ishmael frowned again. “No,” he said. “The farm was owned by two brothers, one of whom was later murdered in a small village, where three innocent children were accused of the crime.”

“Jacques,” Sunny said.

“No,” Ishmael said with another frown. “There was some argument about his name, actually, as he appeared to use several names depending on what he was wearing. In any case, the student in my class began to be very suspicious about the tea her guardian would pour for her when she got home from school. Rather than drink it, she would dump it into a houseplant that had been used to decorate a well-known stylish restaurant with a fish theme.”

“Café Salmonella,” Violet said.

“No,” Ishmael said, and frowned once more. “The Bistro Smelt. Of course, my student realized she couldn’t keep feeding tea to the houseplant, particularly after it withered away and the houseplant’s owner was whisked off to Peru aboard a mysterious ship.”

“The *Prospero*,” Klaus said.

Ishmael offered the youngsters yet another frown. “Yes,” he said, “although at the time the ship was called the *Pericles*. But my student didn’t know that. She only wanted to avoid being poisoned, and I had an idea that an antidote might be hidden—”

“Yaw,” Sunny interrupted, and her siblings nodded in agreement. By “yaw,” the youngest Baudelaire meant “Ishmael’s story is tangential,” a word which here means “answering questions other than the ones the Baudelaires had asked.”

“We want to know what’s going on here on the island, at this very moment,” Violet said, “not what happened in a classroom many years ago.”

“But what is happening now and what happened then are part of the same story,” Ishmael said. “If I don’t tell you how I came to prefer tea that’s as bitter as wormwood, then you won’t know how I came to have a very important conversation with a waiter in a lakeside town. And if I don’t tell you about that conversation, then you won’t know how I ended up on a certain bathyscaphe, or how I ended up shipwrecked here, or how I came to meet your parents, or anything else contained in this book.” He took the heavy volume from Klaus’s hands and ran his fingers along the spine, where the long, somewhat wordy title was printed in gold block letters. “People have been writing stories in this book since the first castaways washed up on the island, and all the stories are connected in one way or another. If you ask one question, it will lead you to another, and another, and another. It’s like peeling an onion.”

“But you can’t read every story, and answer every question,” Klaus said, “even if you’d like to.”

Ishmael smiled and tugged at his beard. “That’s just what your parents told me,” he said. “When I arrived here they’d been on the island a few months, but they’d become the colony’s facilitators, and had suggested some new customs. Your father had suggested that a few castaway construction workers install the periscope in the tree, to search for storms, and your mother had suggested that a shipwrecked plumber devise a water filtration system, so the colony could have fresh water, right from the kitchen sink. Your parents had begun a library from all the documents that were here, and were adding hundreds of stories to the commonplace book. Gourmet meals were served, and your parents had convinced some of the other castaways to expand this underground space.” He gestured to the long bookshelf, which disappeared into the darkness. “They wanted to dig a passageway that would lead to a marine research center and rhetorical advice service some miles away."

The Baudelaires exchanged amazed looks. Captain Widdershins had described such a place, and in fact the children had spent some desperate hours in its ruined basement. "You mean if we walk along the bookcase," Klaus said, "we'll reach Anwhistle Aquatics?"

Ishmael shook his head. "The passageway was never finished," he said, "and it's a good thing, too. The research center was destroyed in a fire, which might have spread through the passageway and reached the island. And it turned out that a very deadly fungus was contained in that place. I shudder to think what might happen if the Medusoid Mycelium ever reached these shores."

The Baudelaires looked at one another again, but said nothing, preferring to keep one of their secrets even as Ishmael told them some of his own. The story of the Baudelaire children may have connected with Ishmael's story of the spores contained in the diving helmet Count Olaf was hiding under his gown in the bird cage in which he was a prisoner, but the siblings saw no reason to volunteer this information.

"Some islanders thought the passage was a wonderful idea," Ishmael continued. "Your parents wanted to carry all of the documents that had washed up here to Anwhistle Aquatics, where they might be sent to a sub-sub-librarian who had a secret library. Others wanted to keep the island safe, far from the treachery of the world. By the time I arrived, some islanders wanted to mutiny, and abandon your parents on the coastal shelf." The facilitator heaved a great sigh, and closed the heavy book in his lap. "I walked into the middle of this story," he said, "just as you walked into the middle of mine. Some of the islanders had found weapons in the detritus, and the situation might have become violent if I hadn't convinced the colony to simply abandon your parents. We allowed them to pack a few books into a fishing boat your father had built, and in the morning they left with a few of their comrades as the coastal shelf flooded. They left behind everything they'd created here, from the periscope I use to predict the weather to the commonplace book where I continue their research."

“You drove our parents away?” Violet asked in amazement.

“They were very sad to go,” Ishmael said. “Your mother was pregnant with you, Violet, and after all of their years with V.F.D. your parents weren’t sure they wanted their children exposed to the world’s treachery. But they didn’t understand that if the passageway had been completed, you would have been exposed to the world’s treachery in any case. Sooner or later, everyone’s story has an unfortunate event or two—a schism or a death, a fire or a mutiny, the loss of a home or the destruction of a tea set. The only solution, of course, is to stay as far away from the world as possible and lead a safe, simple life.”

“That’s why you keep so many items away from the others,” Klaus said.

“It depends on how you look at it,” Ishmael said. “I wanted this place to be as safe as possible, so when I became the island’s facilitator, I suggested some new customs myself. I moved the colony to the other side of the island, and I trained the sheep to drag the weapons away, and then the books and mechanical devices, so none of the world’s detritus would interfere with our safety. I suggested we all dress alike, and eat the same meals, to avoid any future schisms.”

“Jojishoji,” Sunny said, which meant something like, “I don’t believe that abridging the freedom of expression and the free exercise thereof is the proper way to run a community.”

“Sunny’s right,” Violet said. “The other islanders couldn’t have agreed with these new customs.”

“I didn’t force them,” Ishmael said, “but, of course, the coconut cordial helped. The fermented beverage is so strong that it serves as a sort of opiate for the people here.”

“Lethe?” Sunny asked.

“An opiate is something that makes people drowsy and inactive,” Klaus said, “or even forgetful.”

"The more cordial the islanders drank," Ishmael explained, "the less they thought about the past, or complained about the things they were missing."

"That's why hardly anyone leaves this place," Violet said. "They're too drowsy to think about leaving."

"Occasionally someone leaves," Ishmael said, and looked down at the Incredibly Deadly Viper, who gave him a brief hiss. "Some time ago, two women sailed off with this very snake, and a few years later, a man named Thursday left with a few comrades."

"So Thursday is alive," Klaus said, "just like Kit said."

"Yes," Ishmael admitted, "but at my suggestion, Miranda told her daughter that he died in a storm, so she wouldn't worry about the schism that divided her parents."

"Electra," Sunny said, which meant "A family shouldn't keep such terrible secrets," but Ishmael did not ask for a translation.

"Except for those troublemakers," he said, "everyone has stayed here. And why shouldn't they? Most of the castaways are orphans, like me, and like you. I know your story, Baudelaires, from all the newspaper articles, police reports, financial newsletters, telegrams, private correspondence, and fortune cookies that have washed up here. You've been wandering this treacherous world since your story began, and you've never found a place as safe as this one. Why don't you stay? Give up your mechanical inventions and your reading and your cooking. Forget about Count Olaf and V.F.D. Leave your ribbon, and your commonplace book, and your whisk, and your raft library, and lead a simple, safe life on our shores."

"What about Kit?" Violet asked.

"In my experience, the Snickets are as much trouble as the Baudelaires," Ishmael said. "That's why I suggested you leave her on the coastal shelf, so she wouldn't make trouble for the colony. But if you can be convinced to choose a simpler life, I suppose she can, too."

The Baudelaires looked at one another doubtfully. They already knew that Kit wanted to return to the world and make sure justice was served, and as volunteers they should have been eager to join her. But Violet, Klaus, and Sunny were not sure they could abandon the first safe place they had found, even if it was a little dull. “Can’t we stay here,” Klaus asked, “and lead a more complicated life, with the items and documents here in the arboretum?”

“And spices?” Sunny added.

“And keep them a secret from the other islanders?” Ishmael said with a frown.

“That’s what you’re doing,” Klaus couldn’t help pointing out. “All day long you sit in your chair and make sure the island is safe from the detritus of the world, but then you sneak off to the arboretum on your perfectly healthy feet and write in a commonplace book while snacking on bitter apples. You want everyone to lead a simple, safe life—everyone except yourself.”

“No one should lead the life I lead,” Ishmael said, with a long, sad tug on his beard. “I’ve spent countless years cataloging all of the objects that have washed up on these shores and all the stories those objects tell. I’ve repaired all the documents that the storms have damaged, and taken notes on every detail. I’ve read more of the world’s treacherous history than almost anyone, and as one of my colleagues once said, this history is indeed little more than the register of crimes, follies, and misfortunes of mankind.”

“Gibbon,” Sunny said. She meant something like, “We want to read this history, no matter how miserable it is,” and her siblings were quick to translate. But Ishmael tugged at his beard again, and shook his head firmly at the three children.

“Don’t you see?” he asked. “I’m not just the island’s facilitator. I’m the island’s parent. I keep this library far away from the people under my care, so that they will never be disturbed by the world’s terrible secrets.” The facilitator reached into a pocket of his robe and held out a small object. The

Baudelaires saw that it was an ornate ring, emblazoned with the initial R, and stared at it, quite puzzled.

Ishmael opened the enormous volume in his lap, and turned a few pages to read from his notes. “This ring,” he said, “once belonged to the Duchess of Winnipeg, who gave it to her daughter, who was also the Duchess of Winnipeg, who gave it to her daughter, and so on and so on and so on. Eventually, the last Duchess of Winnipeg joined V.F.D., and gave it to Kit Snicket’s brother. He gave it to your mother. For reasons I still don’t understand, she gave it back to him, and he gave it to Kit, and Kit gave it to your father, who gave it to your mother when they were married. She kept it locked in a wooden box that could only be opened by a key that was kept in a wooden box that could only be opened by a code that Kit Snicket learned from her grandfather. The wooden box turned to ashes in the fire that destroyed the Baudelaire mansion, and Captain Widdershins found the ring in the wreckage only to lose it in a storm at sea, which eventually washed it onto our shores.”

“Neiklot?” Sunny asked, which meant “Why are you telling us about this ring?”

“The point of the story isn’t the ring,” Ishmael said. “It’s the fact that you’ve never seen it until this moment. This ring, with its long secret history, was in your home for years, and your parents never mentioned it. Your parents never told you about the Duchess of Winnipeg, or Captain Widdershins, or the Snicket siblings, or V.F.D. Your parents never told you they’d lived here, or that they were forced to leave, or any other details of their own unfortunate history. They never told you their whole story.”

“Then let us read that book,” Klaus said, “so we can find out for ourselves.”

Ishmael shook his head. “You don’t understand,” he said, which is something the middle Baudelaire never liked to be told. “Your parents didn’t tell you these things because they wanted to shelter you, just as this apple tree shelters the items in the arboretum from the island’s frequent storms, and just as I shelter the colony from the complicated history of the world. No sensible parent would let their child read even the title of this dreadful, sad chronicle, when they could keep them far from the treachery of the world instead. Now that you've ended up here, don't you want to respect their wishes?" He closed the book again, and stood up, gazing at all three Baudelaires in turn. "Just because your parents have died," he said quietly, "doesn't mean they've failed you. Not if you stay here and lead the life they wanted you to lead."

Violet thought of her mother again, bringing the cup of star anise tea on that restless evening. "Are you sure this is what our parents would have wanted?" she asked, not knowing if she could trust his answer.

"If they didn't want to keep you safe," he said, "they would have told you everything, so you could add another chapter to this unfortunate history." He put the book down on the reading chair, and put the ring in Violet's hand. "You belong here, Baudelaires, on this island and under my care. I'll tell the islanders that you've changed your minds, and that you're abandoning your troublesome past."

"Will they support you?" Violet asked, thinking of Erewhon and Finn and their plan to mutiny at breakfast.

"Of course they will," Ishmael said. "The life we lead here on the island is better than the treachery of the world. Leave the arboretum with me, children, and you can join us for breakfast."

"And cordial," Klaus said.

"No apples," Sunny said.

Ishmael gave the children one last nod, and led the children up through the gap in the roots of the tree, turning off the lights as he went. The Baudelaires stepped out into the arboretum, and looked back one last time at the secret space. In the dim light they could just make out the shape of the Incredibly Deadly Viper, who slithered over Ishmael's commonplace book and followed the children into the morning air. The sun filtered through the shade of the enormous apple tree, and shone on the gold block letters on the spine of the book. The children wondered whether the letters had been printed there by their parents, or perhaps by the previous writer of the commonplace book, or the writer before that, or the writer before that. They wondered how many stories the oddly titled history contained, and how many people had gazed at the gold lettering before paging through the previous crimes, follies, and misfortunes and adding more of their own, like the thin layers of an onion. As they walked out of the arboretum, led by their clay-footed facilitator, the Baudelaire orphans wondered about their own unfortunate history, and that of their parents and all the other castaways who had washed up on the shores of the island, adding chapter upon chapter to *A Series of Unfortunate Events.*

CHAPTER
Eleven

Perhaps one night, when you were very small, someone tucked you into bed and read you a story called "The Little Engine That Could," and if so then you have my profound sympathies, as it is one of the most tedious stories on Earth. The story probably put you right to sleep, which is the reason it is read to children, so I will remind you that the story involves the engine of a train that for some reason has the ability to think and talk. Someone asks the Little Engine That Could to do a difficult task too dull for me to describe, and the engine isn't sure it can accomplish this, but it begins to mutter to itself, "I think I can, I think I can, I think I can," and before long it has muttered its way to success. The moral of the story is that if you tell yourself you can do something, then you can actually do it, a moral easily disproved if you tell yourself that you can eat nine pints of ice cream in a single sitting, or that you can shipwreck yourself on a distant island simply by setting off in a rented canoe with holes sawed in it.

I only mention the story of the Little Engine That Could so that when I say that the Baudelaire orphans, as they left the arboretum with Ishmael and headed back toward the island colony, were on board the Little Engine That Couldn't, you will understand what I mean. For one thing, the children were being dragged back to Ishmael's tent on the large wooden sleigh, helmed by Ishmael in his enormous clay chair and dragged by the island's wild sheep, and if you have ever wondered why horse-drawn carriages and dogsleds are far more common modes of travel than sheep-dragged sleighs, it is because sheep are not well-suited for employment in the transportation industry. The sheep meandered and detoured, lollygagged and moseyed, and occasionally stopped to nibble on wild grass or simply breathe in the morning air, and Ishmael tried to convince the sheep to go faster through his facilitation skills, rather than through standard shepherding procedures. “I don’t want to force you,” he kept saying, “but perhaps you sheep could go a bit faster,” and the sheep would merely stare blankly at the old man and keep shuffling along.

But the Baudelaire orphans were on board the Little Engine That Couldn’t not only because of the sheep’s languor—a word which here means “inability to pull a large, wooden sleigh at a reasonable pace”—but because their own thoughts were not spurring them to action. Unlike the engine in the tedious story, no matter what Violet, Klaus, and Sunny told themselves, they could not imagine a successful solution to their difficulties. The children tried to tell themselves that they would do as Ishmael had suggested, and lead a safe life on the colony, but they could not imagine abandoning Kit Snicket on the coastal shelf, or letting her return to the world to see that justice would be served without accompanying her on this noble errand. The siblings tried to tell themselves that they would obey their parents’ wishes, and stay sheltered from their unfortunate history, but they did not think that they could keep themselves away from the arboretum, or from reading what their parents had written in the enormous book. The Baudelaires tried to tell themselves that they would join Erewhon and Finn in the mutiny at breakfast, but they could not picture threatening the facilitator and his supporters with weapons, particularly because they had not brought any from the arboretum. They tried to tell themselves that at least they could be glad that Count Olaf was not a threat, but they could not quite approve of his being locked in a bird cage, and they shuddered to think of the fungus hidden in his gown and the scheme hidden in his head. And, throughout the entire journey over the brae and back toward the beach, the three children tried to tell themselves that everything was all right, but of course everything was *not* all right. Everything was all wrong, and Violet, Klaus, and Sunny did not quite know how a safe place, far from the treachery of the world, had become so dangerous and complicated as soon as they had arrived. The Baudelaire orphans sat in the sleigh, staring at Ishmael’s clay-covered clay feet, and no matter how many times they thought they could, they thought they could, they thought they could think of an end to their troubles, they knew it simply was not the case.

Finally, however, the sheep dragged the sleigh across the beach's white sands and through the opening of the enormous tent. Once again, the joint was hopping, but the gathered islanders were in the midst of an argy-bargy, a word for "argument" that is far less cute than it sounds. Despite the presence of an opiate in seashells dangling from the waists of every colonist, the islanders were anything but drowsy and inactive. Alonso was grabbing the arm of Willa, who was shrieking in annoyance while stepping on Dr. Kurtz's foot. Sherman's face was even redder than usual as he threw sand in the face of Mr. Pitcairn, who appeared to be trying to bite Brewster's finger. Professor Fletcher was shouting at Ariel, and Ms. Marlow was stomping her feet at Calypso, and Madame Nordoff and Rabbi Bligh seemed ready to begin wrestling on the sand. Byam twirled his mustache at Ferdinand, while Robinson tugged his beard at Larsen and Weyden seemed to tear out her red hair for no reason at all. Jonah and Sadie Bellamy were standing face-to-face arguing, while Friday and Mrs. Caliban were standing back-to-back as if they would never speak to each other again, and all the while Omeros stood near Ishmael's chair with his hands held suspiciously behind his back. While Ishmael gaped at the islanders in amazement, the three children stepped off the sleigh and walked quickly toward Erewhon and Finn, who were looking at them expectantly.

"Where were you?" Finn said. "We waited as long as we could for you to return, but we had to leave your friend behind and begin the mutiny."

"You left Kit out there alone?" Violet said. "You promised you'd stay with her."

"And you promised us weapons," said Erewhon. "Where are they, Baudelaires?"

"We don't have any," Klaus admitted. "Ishmael was at the arboretum."

"Count Olaf was right," Erewhon said. "You failed us, Baudelaires."

"What do you mean, 'Count Olaf was right'?" Violet demanded.

"What do you mean, 'Ishmael was at the arboretum'?" Finn demanded.

“What do you mean, what do I mean?” Erewhon demanded.

“What you mean what you mean what I mean?” Sunny demanded.

“Please, everyone!” Ishmael cried from his clay chair. “I suggest we all take a few sips of cordial and discuss this cordially!”

“I’m tired of drinking cordial,” Professor Fletcher said, “and I’m tired of your suggestions, Ishmael!”

“Call me Ish,” the facilitator said.

“I’m calling you a bad facilitator!” retorted Calypso.

“Please, everyone!” Ishmael cried again, with a nervous tug at his beard. “What is all this argy-bargy about?”

“I’ll tell you what it’s about,” Alonso said. “I washed up on these shores many years ago, after enduring a terrible storm and a dreadful political scandal.”

“So what?” Rabbi Bligh asked. “Eventually, everyone washes up on these shores.”

“I wanted to leave my unfortunate history behind,” Alonso said, “and live a peaceful life free from trouble. But now there are some colonists talking of mutiny. If we’re not careful, this island will become as treacherous as the rest of the world!”

“Mutiny?” Ishmael said in horror. “Who dares talk of mutiny?”

“I dare,” Erewhon said. “I’m tired of your facilitation, Ishmael. I washed ashore on this island after living on another island even farther away. I was tired of a peaceful life, and ready for adventure. But whenever anything exciting arrives on this island, you immediately have it thrown into the arboretum!”

“It depends on how you look at it,” Ishmael protested. “I don’t force anyone to throw anything away.”

“Ishmael is right!” Ariel cried. “Some of us have had enough adventure for a lifetime! I washed up on these shores after finally escaping from prison, where I had disguised myself as a young man for years! I’ve stayed here for my own safety, not to participate in more dangerous schemes!”

“Then you should join our mutiny!” Sherman cried. “Ishmael is not to be trusted! We abandoned the Baudelaires on the coastal shelf, and now he’s brought them back!”

“The Baudelaires never should have been abandoned in the first place!” Ms. Marlow cried. “All they wanted to do was help their friend!”

“Their friend is suspicious,” claimed Mr. Pitcairn. “She arrived on a raft of books.”

“So what?” said Weyden. “I arrived on a raft of books myself.”

“But you abandoned them,” Professor Fletcher pointed out.

“She did nothing of the sort!” cried Larsen. “You helped her hide them, so you could force those children to read!”

“We wanted to learn to read!” Friday insisted.

“You’re reading?” Mrs. Caliban gasped in astonishment.

“You shouldn’t be reading!” cried Madame Nordoff.

“Well, you shouldn’t be yodeling!” cried Dr. Kurtz.

“You’re yodeling?” Rabbi Bligh asked in astonishment. “Maybe we should have a mutiny after all!”

“Yodeling is better than carrying a flashlight!” Jonah cried, pointing at Finn accusingly.

“Carrying a flashlight is better than hiding a picnic basket!” Sadie cried, pointing at Erewhon.

“Hiding a picnic basket is better than pocketing a whisk!” Erewhon said, pointing at Sunny.

“These secrets will destroy us!” Ariel said. “Life here is supposed to be simple!”

“There’s nothing wrong with a complicated life,” said Byam. “I lived a simple life as a sailor for many years, and I was bored to tears until I was shipwrecked.”

“Bored to tears?” Friday said in astonishment. “All I want is the simple life my mother and father had together, without arguing or keeping secrets.”

“That’s enough,” Ishmael said quickly. “I suggest that we stop arguing.”

“I suggest we continue to argue!” cried Erewhon.

“I suggest we abandon Ishmael and his supporters!” cried Professor Fletcher.

“I suggest we abandon the mutineers!” cried Calypso.

“I suggest better food!” cried another islander.

“I suggest more cordial!” cried another.

“I suggest a more attractive robe!”

“I suggest a proper house instead of a tent!”

“I suggest fresh water!”

“I suggest eating bitter apples!”

“I suggest chopping down the apple tree!”

“I suggest burning up the outrigger!”

“I suggest a talent show!”

"I suggest reading a book!"

"I suggest burning all books!"

"I suggest yodeling!"

"I suggest forbidding yodeling!"

"I suggest a safe place!"

"I suggest a complicated life!"

"I suggest it depends on how you look at it!"

"I suggest justice!"

"I suggest breakfast!"

"I suggest we stay and you leave!"

"I suggest you stay and we leave!"

"I suggest we return to Winnipeg!"

The Baudelaires looked at one another in despair as the mutinous schism worked its way through the colony. Seashells hung open at the waists of the islanders, but there was no cordiality evident as the islanders turned against one another in fury, even if they were friends, or members of the same family, or shared a history or a secret organization. The siblings had seen angry crowds before, of course, from the mob psychology of the citizens in the Village of Fowl Devotees to the blind justice of the trial at the Hotel Denouement, but they had never seen a community divide so suddenly and so completely. Violet, Klaus, and Sunny watched the schism unfold and could imagine what the other schisms must have been like, from the schism that split V.F.D., to the schism that drove their parents away from the very same island, to all the other schisms in the world's sad history, with every person suggesting something different, every story like a layer of an onion, and every unfortunate event like a chapter in an enormous book. The Baudelaires watched the terrible argy-bargy and wondered how they could have hoped the island would be a safe place, far from the treachery of the world, when eventually every treachery washed up on its shores, like a castaway tossed by a storm at sea, and divided the people who lived there. The arguing voices of the islanders grew louder and louder, with everyone suggesting something but nobody listening to anyone else's suggestions, until the schism was a deafening roar that was finally broken by the loudest voice of all.

"SILENCE!" bellowed a figure who entered the tent, and the islanders stopped talking at once, and stared in amazement at the person who stood glaring at them in a long dress that bulged at the belly.

"What are you doing here?" gasped someone from the back of the tent. "We abandoned you on the coastal shelf!"

The figure strode into the middle of the tent, and I'm sorry to tell you that it was not Kit Snicket, who was still in a long dress that bulged at the belly on top of her library raft, but Count Olaf, whose bulging belly, of course, was the diving helmet containing the Medusoid Mycelium, and whose orange and yellow dress the Baudelaires suddenly recognized as the dress Esmé Squalor wore on top of the Mortmain Mountains, a hideous thing fashioned to look like an enormous fire, which had somehow washed onto the island's shores like everything else. As Olaf paused to give the siblings a particularly wicked smile, the children tried to imagine the secret history of Esmé's dress, and how, like the ring Violet still held in her hand, it had returned to the Baudelaires' story after all this time.

"You can't abandon me," the villain snarled to the islander. "I'm the king of Olaf-Land."

"This isn't Olaf-Land," Ishmael said, with a stern tug on his beard, "and you're no king, Olaf."

Count Olaf threw back his head and laughed, his tattered dress quivering in mirth, a phrase which here means "making unpleasant rustling noises." With a sneer, he pointed at Ishmael, who still sat in the chair. "Oh, Ish," he said, his eyes shining bright, "I told you many years ago that I would triumph over you someday, and at last that day has arrived. My associate with the weekday for a name told me that you were still hiding out on this island, and—”

“Thursday,” Mrs. Caliban said.

Olaf frowned, and blinked at the freckled woman. “No,” he said. “Monday. She was trying to blackmail an old man who was involved in a political scandal.”

“Gonzalo,” Alonso said.

Olaf frowned again. “No,” he said. “We’d gone bird-watching, this old man and I, when we decided to rob a sealing schooner owned by—”

“Humphrey,” Weyden said.

“No,” Olaf said with another frown. “There was some argument about his name, actually, as a baby adopted by his orphaned children also bore the same name.”

“Bertrand,” Omeros said.

“No,” Olaf said, and frowned yet another time. “The adoption papers were hidden in the hat of a banker who had been promoted to Vice President in Charge of Orphan Affairs.”

“Mr. Poe?” asked Sadie.

“Yes,” Olaf said with a scowl, “although at the time he was better known under his stage name. But I’m not here to discuss the past. I’m here to discuss the future. Your mutineering islanders let me out of this cage, Ishmael, to force you off the island and crown me as king!”

“King?” Erewhon said. “That wasn’t the plan, Olaf.”

“If you want to live, old woman,” Olaf said rudely, “I suggest that you do whatever I say.”

“You’re already giving us suggestions?” Brewster said incredulously. “You’re just like Ishmael, although your outfit is prettier.”

“Thank you,” Count Olaf said, with a wicked smile, “but there’s another important difference between me and this foolish facilitator.”

“Your tattoo?” Friday guessed.

“No,” Count Olaf said, with a frown. “If you were to wash the clay of Ishmael’s feet, you’d see he has the same tattoo as I do.”

“Eyeliner?” guessed Madame Nordoff.

“No,” Count Olaf said sharply. “The difference is that Ishmael is unarmed. He abandoned his weapons long ago, during the V.F.D. schism, refusing to use violence of any sort. But today, you’ll all see how foolish he is.” He paused, and ran his filthy hands along his bulging belly before turning to the facilitator, who was taking something from Omeros’s hands. “I have the only weapon that can threaten you and your supporters,” he bragged. “I’m the king of Olaf-Land, and there’s nothing you and your sheep can do about it.”

“Don’t be so sure about that,” Ishmael said, and raised an object in the air so everyone could see it. It was the harpoon gun that had washed ashore with Olaf and the Baudelaires, after being used to fire at crows at the Hotel Denouement, and at a self-sustaining hot air mobile home in the Village of Fowl Devotees, and at a cotton-candy machine at a county fair when the Baudelaires’ parents were very, very young. Now the weapon was adding another chapter to its secret history, and was pointing right at Count Olaf. “I had Omeros keep this weapon handy,” Ishmael said, “instead of tossing it in the arboretum, because I thought you might escape from that cage, Count Olaf, just as I escaped from the cage you put me in when you set fire to my home.”

“I didn’t set that fire,” Count Olaf said, his eyes shining bright.

“I’ve had enough of your lies,” Ishmael said, and stood up from his chair. Realizing that the facilitator’s feet were not injured after all, the islanders gasped, which requires a large intake of breath, a dangerous thing to do if spores of a deadly fungus are in the air. "I'm going to do what I should have done years ago, Olaf, and slaughter you. I'm going to fire this harpoon gun right into that bulging belly of yours!"

"No!" screamed the Baudelaires in unison, but even the combined voices of the three children were not as loud as Count Olaf's villainous laughter, and the facilitator never heard the children's cry as he pulled the bright red trigger of this terrible weapon. The children heard a *click!* and then a *whoosh!* as the harpoon was fired, and then, as it struck Count Olaf right where Ishmael had promised, they heard the shattering of glass, and the Medusoid Mycelium, with its own secret history of treachery and violence, was free at last to circulate in the air, even in this safe place so far from the world. Everyone in the tent gasped—islanders and colonists, men and women, children and orphans, volunteers and villains and everyone in between. Everyone breathed in the spores of the deadly fungus as Count Olaf toppled backward onto the sand, still laughing even as he gasped himself, and in an instant the schism of the island was over, because everyone in this place—including, of course, the Baudelaire orphans—was suddenly part of the same unfortunate event.

CHAPTER
Twelve

A SERIES of
UNFORTUNATE
EVENTS

It is a curious thing, but as one travels the world getting older and older, it appears that happiness is easier to get used to than despair. The second time you have a root beer float, for instance, your happiness at sipping the delicious concoction may be not quite as enormous as when you first had a root beer float, and the twelfth time your happiness may be still less enormous, until root beer floats begin to offer you very little happiness at all, because you have become used to the taste of vanilla ice cream and root beer mixed together. However, the second time you find a thumbtack in your root beer float, your despair is much greater than the first time, when you dismissed the thumbtack as a freak accident rather than part of the scheme of the soda jerk, a phrase which here means “ice cream shop employee who is trying to injure your tongue,” and by the twelfth time you find a thumbtack your despair is even greater still, until you can hardly utter the phrase “root beer float” without bursting into tears. It is almost as if happiness is an acquired taste, like coconut cordial or ceviche, to which you can eventually become accustomed, but despair is something surprising each time you encounter it. As the glass shattered in the tent, the Baudelaire orphans stood and stared at the standing figure of Ishmael, but even as they felt the Medusoid Mycelium drift into their bodies, each tiny spore feeling like the footstep of an ant walking down their throats, they could not believe that their own story could contain such despair once more, or that such a terrible thing had happened.

“What happened?” Friday cried. “I heard glass breaking!”

“Never mind the breaking glass,” Erewhon said. “I feel something in my throat, like a tiny seed!”

“Never mind your seedy throat,” Finn said. “I see Ishmael standing up on his own two feet!”

Count Olaf cackled from the white sand where he lay. With one dramatic gesture he yanked the harpoon out of the mess of broken helmet and tattered dress at his stomach, and threw it at Ishmael’s clay feet. “The sound you heard was the shattering of a diving helmet,” he sneered. “The seeds you feel in your throats are the spores of the Medusoid Mycelium, and the man standing on his own two feet is the one who has slaughtered you all!”

“The Medusoid Mycelium?” Ishmael repeated in astonishment, as the islanders gasped again. “On these shores? It can’t be! I’ve spent my life trying to keep the island forever safe from that terrible fungus!”

“Nothing’s safe forever, thank goodness,” Count Olaf said, “and you of all people should know that eventually everything washes up on these shores. The Baudelaire family has finally returned to this island after you threw them off years ago, and they brought the Medusoid Mycelium with them.”

Ishmael’s eyes widened, and he jumped off the edge of the sleigh to stand and confront the Baudelaire orphans. As his feet landed on the ground, the clay cracked and fell away, and the children could see that the facilitator had a tattoo of an eye on his left ankle, just as Count Olaf had said. “*You* brought the Medusoid Mycelium?” he asked. “You had a deadly fungus with you all this time, and you kept it a secret from us?”

“You’re a fine one to talk about keeping secrets!” Alonso said. “Look at your healthy feet, Ishmael! Your dishonesty is the root of the trouble!”

“It’s the mutineers who are the root of the trouble!” cried Ariel. “If they hadn’t let Count Olaf out of the cage, this never would have happened!”

“It depends on how you look at it,” Professor Fletcher said. “In my opinion, all of us are the root of the trouble. If we hadn’t put Count Olaf in the cage, he never would have threatened us!”

“We’re the root of the trouble because we failed to find the diving helmet,” Ferdinand said. “If we’d retrieved it while storm scavenging, the sheep would have dragged it to the arboretum and we would have been safe!”

“Omeros is the root of the trouble,” Dr. Kurtz said, pointing at the young boy. “He’s the one who gave Ishmael the harpoon gun instead of dumping it in the arboretum!”

“It’s Count Olaf who’s the root of the trouble!” cried Larsen. “He’s the one who brought the fungus into the tent!”

“I’m not the root of the trouble,” Count Olaf snarled, and then paused to cough loudly before continuing. “I’m the king of the island!”

“It doesn’t matter whether you’re king or not,” Violet said. “You’ve breathed in the fungus like everyone else.”

“Violet’s right,” Klaus said. “We don’t have time to stand here arguing.” Even without his commonplace book, Klaus could recite a poem about the fungus that was first recited to him by Fiona shortly before she had broken his heart. *“A single spore has such grim power / That you may die within the hour,”* he said. “If we don’t quit our fighting and work together, we’ll all end up dead.”

The tent was filled with ululation, a word which here means “the sound of panicking islanders.” “Dead?” Madame Nordoff shrieked. “Nobody said the fungus was deadly! I thought we were merely being threatened with forbidden food!"

"I didn't stay on this island to die!" cried Ms. Marlow. "I could have died at home!"

"Nobody is going to die," Ishmael announced to the crowd.

"It depends on how you look at it," Rabbi Bligh said. "Eventually we're all going to die."

"Not if you follow my suggestions," Ishmael insisted. "Now first, I suggest that everyone take a nice, long drink from their seashells. The cordial will chase the fungus from your throats."

"No, it won't!" Violet cried. "Fermented coconut milk has no effect on the Medusoid Mycelium!"

"That may be so," Ishmael said, "but at least we'll all feel a bit calmer."

"You mean drowsy and inactive," Klaus corrected. "The cordial is an opiate."

"There's nothing wrong with cordiality," Ishmael said. "I suggest we all spend a few minutes discussing our situation in a cordial manner. We can decide what the root of the problem is, and come up with a solution at our leisure."

"That does sound reasonable," Calypso admitted.

"Trahison des clercs!" Sunny cried, which meant "You're forgetting about the quick-acting poison in the fungus!"

"Sunny's right," Klaus said. "We need to find a solution now, not sit around talking about it over beverages!"

"The solution is in the arboretum," Violet said, "and in the secret space under the roots of the apple tree."

“Secret space?” Sherman said. “What secret space?”

“There’s a library down there,” Klaus said, as the crowd murmured in surprise, “cataloging all of the objects that have washed ashore and all the stories those objects tell.”

“And kitchen,” Sunny added. “Maybe horseradish.”

“Horseradish is the one way to dilute the poison,” Violet explained, and recited the rest of the poem the children had heard aboard the *Queequeg.* *“Is dilution simple? But of course! / Just one small dose of root of horse.”* She looked around the tent at the frightened faces of the islanders. “The kitchen beneath the apple tree might have horseradish,” she said. “We can save ourselves if we hurry.”

“They’re lying,” Ishmael said. “There’s nothing in the arboretum but junk, and there’s nothing underneath the tree but dirt. The Baudelaires are trying to trick you.”

“We’re not trying to trick anyone,” Klaus said. “We’re trying to save everyone.”

“The Baudelaires knew the Medusoid Mycelium was here,” Ishmael pointed out, “and they never told us. You can’t trust them, but you can trust me, and I suggest we all sit and sip our cordials.”

“Razoo,” Sunny said, which meant “You’re the one not to be trusted,” but rather than translate, her siblings stepped closer to Ishmael so they could speak to him in relative privacy.

“Why are you doing this?” Violet asked. “If you just sit here and drink cordial, you’ll be doomed.”

“We’ve all breathed in the poison,” Klaus said. “We’re all in the same boat.”

Ishmael raised his eyebrows, and gave the children a grim smile. “We’ll see about that,” he said. “Now get out of my tent.”

“Hightail it,” Sunny said, which meant “We’d better hurry,” and her siblings nodded in agreement. The Baudelaire orphans quickly left the tent, looking back to get one more glimpse of the worried islanders, the scowling facilitator, and Count Olaf, who still lay on the sand clutching his belly, as if the harpoon had not just destroyed the diving helmet, but wounded him, too.

Violet, Klaus, and Sunny did not travel back to the far side of the island by sheep-dragged sleigh, but even as they hurried over the brae they felt as if they were aboard the Little Engine That Couldn’t, not only because of the desperate nature of their errand, but because of the poison they felt working its wicked way through the Baudelaire systems. Violet and Klaus learned what their sister had gone through deep beneath the ocean’s surface, when Sunny had nearly perished from the fungus’s deadly poison, and Sunny received a refresher course, a phrase which here means “another opportunity to feel the stalks and caps of the Medusoid Mycelium begin to sprout in her little throat.” The children had to stop several times to cough, as the growing fungus was making it difficult to breathe, and by the time they stood underneath the branches of the apple tree, the Baudelaire orphans were wheezing heavily in the afternoon sun.

“We don’t have much time,” Violet said, between breaths.

“We’ll go straight to the kitchen,” Klaus said, walking through the gap in the tree’s roots as the Incredibly Deadly Viper had shown them.

“Hope horseradish,” Sunny said, following her brother, but when the Baudelaires reached the kitchen they were in for a disappointment. Violet flicked the switch that lit up the kitchen, and the three children hurried to the spice rack, reading the labels on the jars and bottles one by one, but as they searched their hopes began to fade. The children found many of their favorite spices, including sage, oregano, and paprika, which was available in a number of varieties organized according to their level of smokiness. They found some of their least favorite spices, including dried parsley, which scarcely tastes like anything, and garlic salt, which forces the taste of everything else to flee. They found spices they associated with certain dishes, such as turmeric, which their father used to use while making curried peanut soup, and nutmeg, which their mother used to mix into gingerbread, and they found spices they did not associate with anything, such as marjoram, which everyone owns but scarcely anyone uses, and powdered lemon peel, which should only be used in emergencies, such as when fresh lemons have become extinct. They found spices used practically everywhere, such as salt and pepper, and spices used in certain regions, such as chipotle peppers and vindaloo rub, but none of the labels read HORSERADISH, and when they opened the jars and bottles, none of the powders, leaves, and seeds inside smelled like the horseradish factory that once stood on Lousy Lane.

“It doesn’t have to be horseradish,” Violet said quickly, putting down a jar of tarragon in frustration. “Wasabi was an adequate substitute when Sunny was infected.”

“Or Eutrema,” Sunny wheezed.

“There’s no wasabi here, either,” Klaus said, sniffing a jar of mace and frowning. “Maybe it’s hidden somewhere.”

“Who would hide horseradish?” Violet asked, after a long cough.

“Our parents,” Sunny said.

“Sunny’s right,” Klaus said. “If they knew about Anwhistle Aquatics, they might have known of the dangers of the Medusoid Mycelium. Any horseradish that washed up on the island would have been very valuable indeed.”

“We don’t have time to search the entire arboretum to find horseradish,” Violet said. She reached into her pocket, her fingers brushing against the ring Ishmael had given her, and found the ribbon the facilitator had been using as a bookmark, which she used to tie up her hair so she might think better. “That would be harder than trying to find the sugar bowl in the entire Hotel Denouement.”

At the mention of the sugar bowl, Klaus gave his glasses a quick polish and began to page through his commonplace book, while Sunny picked up her whisk and bit it thoughtfully. “Maybe it’s hidden in one of the other spice jars,” the middle Baudelaire said.

“We smelled them all,” Violet said, between wheezes. “None of them smelled like horseradish.”

“Maybe the scent was disguised by another spice,” Klaus said. “Something that was even more bitter than horseradish would cover the smell. Sunny, what are some of the bitterest spices?”

“Cloves,” said Sunny, and wheezed. “Cardamom, arrowroot, wormwood.”

“Wormwood,” Klaus said thoughtfully, and flipped the pages of his commonplace book. “Kit mentioned wormwood once,” he said, thinking of poor Kit alone on the coastal shelf. “She said tea should be as bitter as wormwood and as sharp as a two-edged sword. We were told the same thing when we were served tea right before our trial.”

“No wormwood here,” Sunny said.

“Ishmael also said something about bitter tea,” Violet said. “Remember? That student of his was afraid of being poisoned.”

“Just like we are,” Klaus said, feeling the mushrooms growing inside him. “I wish we’d heard the end of that story.”

“I wish we’d heard every story,” Violet said, her voice sounding hoarse and rough from the poison. “I wish our parents had told us everything, instead of sheltering us from the treachery of the world.”

“Maybe they did,” Klaus said, his voice as rough as his sister’s, and the middle Baudelaire walked to the reading chairs in the middle of the room and picked up *A Series of Unfortunate Events*. “They wrote all of their secrets here. If they hid the horseradish, we’ll find it in this book.”

“We don’t have time to read that entire book,” Violet said, “any more than we have time to search the entire arboretum.”

"If we fail," Sunny said, her voice heavy with fungus, "at least we die reading together."

The Baudelaire orphans nodded grimly, and embraced one another. Like most people, the children had occasionally been in a curious and somewhat morbid mood, and had spent a few moments wondering about the circumstances of their own deaths, although since that unhappy day on Briny Beach when Mr. Poe had first informed them about the terrible fire, the children had spent so much time trying to avoid their own deaths that they preferred not to think about it in their time off. Most people do not choose their final circumstances, of course, and if the Baudelaires had been given the choice they would have liked to live to a very old age, which for all I know they may be doing. But if the three children had to perish while they were still three children, then perishing in one another's company while reading words written long ago by their mother and father was much better than many other things they could imagine, and so the three Baudelaires sat together in one of the reading chairs, preferring to be close to one another rather than having more room to sit, and together they opened the enormous book and turned back the pages until they reached the moment in history when their parents arrived on the island and began taking notes. The entries in the book alternated between the handwriting of the Baudelaire father and the handwriting of the Baudelaire mother, and the children could imagine their parents sitting in these same chairs, reading out loud what they had written and suggesting things to add to the register of crimes, follies, and misfortunes of mankind that comprised *A Series of Unfortunate Events*. The children, of course, would have liked to savor each word their parents had written—the word "savor," you probably know, here means "read slowly, as each sentence in their parents' handwriting was like a gift from beyond the grave"—but as the poison of the Medusoid Mycelium advanced further and further, the siblings had to skim, scanning each page for the words "horseradish" or "wasabi." As you know if you've ever skimmed a book, you end up getting a strange view of the story, with just glimpses here and there of what is going on, and some authors insert confusing sentences in the middle of a book just to confuse anyone who might be skimming. Three very short men were carrying a large, flat piece of wood, painted to look like a living room. As the Baudelaire orphans searched for the secret they hoped they would find, they caught glimpses of other secrets their parents had kept, and as Violet, Klaus, and Sunny spotted the names of people the Baudelaire parents had known, things they had whispered to these people, the codes hidden in the whispers, and many other intriguing details, the children hoped they would have the opportunity to reread *A Series of Unfortunate Events* on a less frantic occasion. On that afternoon, however, they read faster and faster, looking desperately for the one secret that might save them as the hour began to pass and the Medusoid Mycelium grew faster and faster inside them, as if the deadly fungus also did not have time to savor its treacherous path. As they read more and more, it grew harder and harder for the Baudelaires to breathe, and when Klaus finally spotted one of the words he had been looking for, he thought for a moment it was just a vision brought on by all the stalks and caps growing inside him.

"Horseradish!" he said, his voice rough and wheezy. "Look: 'Ishmael's fearmongering has stopped work on the passageway, even though we have a plethora of horseradish in case of any emergency.'"

Violet started to speak, but then choked on the fungus and coughed for a long while. "What does 'fearmongering' mean?" she said finally.

"'Plethora'?" Sunny's voice was little more than a mushroom-choked whisper.

"'Fearmongering' means 'making people afraid,'" said Klaus, whose vocabulary was unaffected by the poison, "and 'plethora' means 'more than enough.'" He gave a large, shuddering wheeze, and continued to read. "'We're attempting a botanical hybrid through the tuberous canopy, which should bring safety to fruition despite its dangers to our associates in utero. Of course, in case we are banished, Beatrice is hiding a small amount in a vess—'"

The middle Baudelaire interrupted himself with a cough that was so violent he dropped the book to the floor. His sisters held him tightly as his body shook against the poison and one pale hand pointed at the ceiling. "'Tuberous canopy,'" he wheezed finally. "Our father means the roots above our heads. A botanical hybrid is a plant made from the combination of two other plants." He shuddered, and his eyes, behind his glasses, filled with tears. "I don't know what he's talking about," he said finally.

Violet looked at the roots over their heads, where the periscope disappeared into the network of the tree. To her horror she found that her vision was becoming blurry, as if the fungus was growing over her eyes. "It sounds like they put the horseradish into the roots of the plant, in order to make everyone safe," she said. "That's what 'bringing safety to fruition' would be, the way a tree brings its crop to fruition."

"Apples!" cried Sunny in a strangled voice. "Bitter apples!"

"Of course!" Klaus said. "The tree is a hybrid, and its apples are bitter because they contain horseradish!"

"If we eat an apple," Violet said, "the fungus will be diluted."

"Gentreefive," Sunny agreed in a croak, and lowered herself off her siblings' laps, wheezing desperately as she tried to get to the gap in the roots. Klaus tried to follow her, but when he stood up the poison made him so dizzy that he had to sit back down and clasp his throbbing head. Violet coughed painfully, and gripped her brother's arm.

"Come on," she said, in a frantic wheeze.

Klaus shook his head. "I'm not sure we can make it," he said.

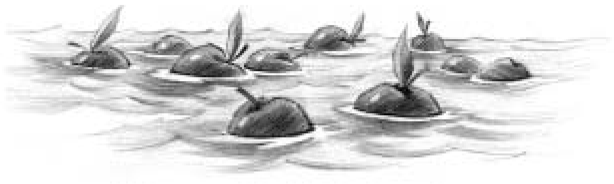
Sunny reached toward the gap in the roots and then curled to the floor in pain. "Kikbucit?" she asked, her voice weak and faint.

"We can't die here," Violet said, her voice so feeble her siblings could scarcely hear her. "Our parents saved our lives in this very room, many years ago, without even knowing it."

"Maybe not," Klaus said. "Maybe this is the end of our story."

"Tumurchap," Sunny said, but before anyone could ask what she meant, the children heard another sound, faint and strange, in the secret space beneath the apple tree their parents had hybridized with horseradish long ago. The sound was sibilant, a word which might appear to have something to do with siblings, but actually refers to a sort of whistle or hiss, such as a steam engine might make as it comes to a stop, or an audience might make after sitting through one of Al Funcoot's plays. The Baudelaires were so desperate and frightened that for a moment they thought it might be the sound of Medusoid Mycelium, celebrating its poisonous triumph over the three children, or perhaps just the sound of their hopes evaporating. But the sibilance was not the sound of evaporating hope or celebrating fungus, and thank goodness it was not the sound of a steam engine or a disgruntled theatrical audience, as the Baudelaires were not strong enough to confront such things. The hissing sound came from one of the few inhabitants of the island whose story contained not one but two shipwrecks, and perhaps because of its own sad history, this inhabitant was sympathetic to the sad history of the Baudelaires, although it is difficult to say how much sympathy can be felt by an animal, no matter how friendly. I do not have the courage to do much research on this matter, and my only herpetological comrade's story ended quite some time ago, so what this reptile was thinking as it slid toward the children is a detail of the Baudelaires' history that may never be revealed. But even with this missing detail, it is quite clear what happened. The snake slithered through the gap in the roots of the tree, and whatever the serpent was thinking, it was quite clear from the sibilant sound that came hissing through the reptile's clenched teeth that the Incredibly Deadly Viper was offering the Baudelaire orphans an apple.

CHAPTER
Thirteen



It is a well-known but curious fact that the first bite of an apple always tastes the best, which is why the heroine of a book much more suitable to read than this one spends an entire afternoon eating the first bite of a bushel of apples. But even this anarchic little girl—the word “anarchic” here means “apple-loving”—never tasted a bite as wonderful as the Baudelaire orphans’ first bite of the apple from the tree their parents had hybridized with horseradish. The apple was not as bitter as the Baudelaire orphans would have guessed, and the horseradish gave the juice of the apple a slight, sharp edge, like the air on a winter morning. But of course, the biggest appeal of the apple offered by the Incredibly Deadly Viper was its immediate effect on the deadly fungus growing inside them. From the moment the Baudelaire teeth bit down on the apple—first Violet’s, and then Klaus’s, and then Sunny’s—the stalks and caps of the Medusoid Mycelium began to shrink, and within moments all traces of the dreaded mushroom had withered away, and the children could breathe clearly and easily. Hugging one another in relief, the Baudelaires found themselves laughing, which is a common reaction among people who have narrowly escaped death, and the snake seemed to be laughing, too, although perhaps it was just appreciating the youngest Baudelaire scratching behind its tiny, hooded ears.

“We should each have another apple,” Violet said, standing up, “to make sure we’ve consumed enough horseradish.”

“And we should collect enough apples for all of the islanders,” Klaus said. “They must be just as desperate as we were.”

“Stockpot,” Sunny said, and walked to the rack of pots on the ceiling, where the snake helped her take down an enormous metal pot that could hold a great number of apples and in fact had been used to make an enormous vat of applesauce a number of years previously.

“You two start picking apples,” Violet said, walking to the periscope. “I want to check on Kit Snicket. The flooding of the coastal shelf must have begun by now, and she must be terrified.”

“I hope she avoided the Medusoid Mycelium,” Klaus said. “I hate to think of what that would do to her child.”

“Phearst,” Sunny said, which meant something like, “We should rescue her promptly.”

“The islanders are in worse shape than Kit,” Klaus said. “We should go to Ishmael’s tent first, and then go rescue Kit.”

Violet peered through the periscope and frowned. “We shouldn’t go to Ishmael’s tent,” she said. “We need to fill that stockpot with apples and get to the coastal shelf as quickly as we can.”

“What do you mean?” Klaus said.

“They’re leaving,” Violet said, and I’m sorry to say it was true. Through the periscope, the eldest Baudelaire could see the shape of the outrigger and the figures of its poisoned passengers, who were pushing it along the coastal shelf toward the library raft where Kit Snicket still lay. The three children each peered through the periscope, and then looked at one another. They knew they should be hurrying, but for a moment none of the Baudelaires could move, as if they were unwilling to travel any farther in their sad history, or see one more part of their story come to an end.

If you have read this far in the chronicle of the Baudelaire orphans—and I certainly hope you have not—then you know we have reached the thirteenth chapter of the thirteenth volume in this sad history, and so you know the end is near, even though this chapter is so lengthy that you might never reach the end of it. But perhaps you do not yet know what the end really means. “The end” is a phrase which refers to the completion of a story, or the final moment of some accomplishment, such as a secret errand, or a great deal of research, and indeed this thirteenth volume marks the completion of my investigation into the Baudelaire case, which required much research, a great many secret errands, and the accomplishments of a number of my comrades, from a trolley driver to a botanical hybridization expert, with many, many typewriter repairpeople in between. But it cannot be said that *The End* contains the end of the Baudelaires’ story, any more than *The Bad Beginning* contained its beginning. The children’s story began long before that terrible day on Briny Beach, but there would have to be another volume to chronicle when the Baudelaires were born, and when their parents married, and who was playing the violin in the candlelit restaurant when the Baudelaire parents first laid eyes on one another, and what was hidden inside that violin, and the childhood of the man who orphaned the girl who put it there, and even then it could not be said that the Baudelaires’ story had not begun, because you would still need to know about a certain tea party held in a penthouse suite, and the baker who made the scones served at the tea party, and the baker’s assistant who smuggled the secret ingredient into the scone batter through a very narrow drainpipe, and how a crafty volunteer created the illusion of a fire in the kitchen simply by wearing a certain dress and jumping around, and even then the beginning of the story would be as far away as the shipwreck that left the Baudelaire parents as castaways on the coastal shelf is far away from the outrigger on which the islanders would depart. One could say, in fact, that no story really has a beginning, and that no story really has an end, as all of the world’s stories are as jumbled as the items in the arboretum, with their details and secrets all heaped together so that the whole story, from beginning to end, depends on how you look at it. We might even say that the world is always in medias res—a Latin phrase which means “in the midst of things” or “in the middle of a narrative”—and that it is impossible to solve any mystery, or find the root of any trouble, and so *The End* is really the middle of the story, as many people in this history will live long past the close of Chapter Thirteen, or even the beginning of the story, as a new child arrives in the world at the chapter’s close. But one cannot sit in the midst of things forever. Eventually one must face that the end is near, and the end of *The End* is quite near indeed, so if I were you I would not read the end of *The End,* as it contains the end of a notorious villain but also the end of a brave and noble sibling, and the end of the colonists' stay on the island, as they sail off the end of the coastal shelf. The end of *The End* contains all these ends, and that does not depend on how you look at it, so it might be best for you to stop looking at *The End* before the end of *The End* arrives, and to stop reading *The End* before you read the end, as the stories that end in *The End* that began in *The Bad Beginning* are beginning to end now.

The Baudelaires hurriedly filled their stockpot with apples and ran to the coastal shelf, hurrying over the brae as quickly as they could. It was past lunchtime, and the waters of the sea were already flooding the shelf, so the water was much deeper than it had been since the children's arrival. Violet and Klaus had to hold the stockpot high in the air, and Sunny and the Incredibly Deadly Viper climbed up on the elder Baudelaires' shoulders to ride along with the bitter apples. The children could see Kit Snicket on the horizon, still lying on the library raft as the waters rose to soak the first few layers of books, and alongside the strange cube was the outrigger. As they drew closer, they saw that the islanders had stopped pushing the boat and were climbing aboard, pausing from time to time to cough, while at the head of the outrigger was the figure of Ishmael, seated in his clay chair, gazing at his poisoned colonists and watching the children approach.

"Stop!" Violet cried, when they were close enough to be heard. "We've discovered a way to dilute the poison!"

"Baudelaires!" came the faint cry of Kit high atop the library raft. "Thank goodness you're here! I think I'm going into labor!"

As I'm sure you know, "labor" is the term for the process by which a woman gives birth, and it is a Herculean task, a phrase which here means "something you would rather not do on a library raft floating on a flooding coastal shelf." Sunny could see, from her stockpot perch, Kit holding her belly and giving the youngest Baudelaire a painful grimace.

“We’ll help you,” Violet promised, “but we need to get these apples to the islanders.”

“They won’t take them!” Kit said. “I tried to tell them how the poison could be diluted, but they insist on leaving!”

“No one’s forcing them,” said Ishmael calmly. “I merely suggested that the island was no longer a safe place, and that we should set sail for another one.”

“You and the Baudelaires are the ones who got us into this mess,” came the drowsy voice of Mr. Pitcairn, thick with fungus and coconut cordial, “but Ishmael is going to get us out.”

“This island used to be a safe place,” said Professor Fletcher, “far from the treachery of the world. But since you’ve arrived it’s become dangerous and complicated.”

“That’s not our fault,” Klaus said, walking closer and closer to the outrigger as the water continued to rise. “You can’t live far from the treachery of the world, because eventually the treachery will wash up on your shores.”

“Exactly,” said Alonso, who yawned. “You washed up and spoiled the island forever.”

“So we’re leaving it to you,” said Ariel, who coughed violently. “You can have this dangerous place. We’re going to sail to safety.”

“Safe here!” Sunny cried, holding up an apple.

“You’ve poisoned us enough,” said Erewhon, and the islanders wheezed in agreement “We don’t want to hear any more of your treacherous ideas.”

“But you were ready to mutiny,” Violet said. “You didn’t want to take Ishmael’s suggestions.”

“That was before the Medusoid Mycelium arrived,” Finn said hoarsely. “He’s been here the longest, so he knows how to keep us safe. At his suggestion, we all drank quite a bit of cordial while he figured out the root of the trouble.” She paused to catch her breath as the sinister fungus continued to grow. “And the root of the trouble, Baudelaires, is you.”

By now the children had reached the outrigger, and they looked up at Ishmael, who raised his eyebrows and stared back at the frantic Baudelaires. “Why are you doing this?” Klaus asked the facilitator. “You know we’re not the root of the problem.”

“In medias res!” Sunny cried.

“Sunny’s right,” Violet said. “The Medusoid Mycelium was around before we were born, and our parents prepared for its arrival by adding horseradish to the roots of the apple tree.”

“If they don’t eat these bitter apples,” Klaus pleaded, “they’ll come to a bitter end. Tell the islanders the whole story, Ishmael, so they can save themselves.”

“The whole story?” Ishmael said, and leaned down from his chair so he could talk to the Baudelaires without the others hearing. “If I told the islanders the whole story, I wouldn’t be keeping them safe from the world’s terrible secrets. They almost learned the whole story this morning, and began to mutiny over breakfast. If they knew all these island’s secrets there’d be a schism in no time at all.”

“Better a schism than a death,” Violet said.

Ishmael shook his head, and fingered the wild strands of his woolly beard. “No one is going to die,” he said. “This outrigger can take us to a beach near Lousy Lane, where we can travel to a horseradish factory.”

“You don’t have time for such a long voyage,” Klaus said.

“I think we do,” Ishmael said. “Even without a compass, I think I can get us to a safe place.”

“You need a *moral* compass,” Violet said. “The spores of the Medusoid Mycelium can kill within the hour. The entire colony could be poisoned, and even if you make it to shore, the fungus could spread to anyone you meet. You’re not keeping anyone safe. You’re endangering the whole world, just to keep a few of your secrets. That’s not parenting! That’s horrid and wrong!”

“I guess it depends on how you look at it,” Ishmael said. “Good-bye, Baudelaires.” He sat up straight and called out to the wheezing islanders. “I suggest you start rowing,” he said, and the colonists reached their arms into the water and began to paddle the outrigger away from the children. The Baudelaires hung on to the side of the boat, and called to the islander who had first found them on the coastal shelf.

“Friday!” Sunny cried. “Take apple!”

“Don’t succumb to peer pressure,” Violet begged.

Friday turned to face the children, and the siblings could see she was terribly frightened. Klaus quickly grabbed an apple from the stockpot, and the young girl leaned out of the boat to touch his hand.

“I’m sorry to leave you behind, Baudelaires,” she said, “but I must go with my family. I’ve already lost my father, and I couldn’t stand to lose anyone else.”

“But your father—” Klaus started to say, but Mrs. Caliban gave him a terrible look and pulled her daughter away from the edge of the outrigger.

“Don’t rock the boat,” she said. “Come here and drink your cordial.”

“Your mother is right, Friday,” Ishmael said firmly. “You should respect your parent’s wishes. It’s more than the Baudelaires ever did.”

“We are respecting our parents’ wishes,” Violet said, hoisting the apples as high as she could. “They didn’t want to shelter us from the world’s treacheries. They wanted us to survive them.”

Ishmael put his hand on the stockpot of apples. “What do your parents know,” he asked, “about surviving?” and with one firm, cruel gesture the old orphan pushed against the stockpot, and the outrigger moved out of the children’s grasp. Violet and Klaus tried to take another step closer to the islanders, but the water had risen too far, and the Baudelaire feet slipped off the surface of the coastal shelf, and the siblings found themselves swimming. The stockpot tipped, and Sunny gave a small shriek and climbed down to Violet’s shoulders as several apples from the pot dropped into the water with a splash. At the sound of the splash, the Baudelaires remembered the apple core that Ishmael had dropped, and realized why the facilitator was so calm in the face of the deadly fungus, and why his voice was the only one of the islanders’ that wasn’t clogged with stalks and caps.

“We have to go after them,” Violet said. “We may be their only chance!”

“We can’t go after them,” Klaus said, still holding the apple. “We have to help Kit.”

“Split up,” Sunny said, staring after the departing outrigger.

Klaus shook his head. “All of us need to stay if we’re going to help Kit give birth.” He gazed at the islanders and listened to the wheezing and coughing coming from the boat fashioned from wild grasses and the limbs of trees. “They made their decision,” he said finally.

“Kontiki,” Sunny said. She meant something along the lines of, “There’s no way they’ll survive the journey,” but the youngest Baudelaire was wrong. There was a way. There was a way to bring the islanders a single apple that they could share, each taking a bite of the precious bitter fruit that might tide them over—the phrase “tide them over,” as you probably know, means “help deal with a difficult situation”—until they reached someplace or someone who could help them, just as the three Baudelaires shared an apple in the secret space where their parents had enabled them to survive one of the most deadly unfortunate events ever to wash up on the island’s shores. Whoever brought the apple to the islanders, of course, would need to swim very stealthily to the outrigger, and it would help if they were quite small and slender, so they might escape the watchful eye of the outrigger’s facilitator. The Baudelaires would not notice the disappearance of the Incredibly Deadly Viper for quite some time, as they would be focused on helping Kit, and so they could never say for sure what happened to the snake, and my research into the reptile’s story is incomplete, so I do not know what other chapters occurred in its history, as Ink, as some prefer to call the snake, slithered from one place to the next, sometimes taking shelter from the treachery of the world and sometimes committing treacherous acts of its own—a history not unlike that of the Baudelaire orphans, which some have called little more than the register of crimes, follies, and misfortunes of mankind. Unless you have investigated the islanders’ case yourself, there is no way of knowing what happened to them as they sailed away from the colony that had been their home. But there was a way they could have survived their journey, a way that may seem fantastic, but is no less fantastic than three children helping a woman give birth. The Baudelaires hurried to the library raft, and lifted Sunny and the stockpot to the top of the raft where Kit lay, so the youngest Baudelaire could hold the wheezing woman’s gloved hand and the bitter apples could dilute the poison inside her as Violet and Klaus pushed the raft back toward shore.

“Have an apple,” Sunny offered, but Kit shook her head.

“I can’t,” she said.

“But you’ve been poisoned,” Violet said. “You must have caught a spore or two from the islanders as they floated by.”

“The apples will harm the baby,” Kit said. “There’s something in the hybrid that’s bad for people who haven’t been born yet. That’s why your mother never tasted one of her own bitter apples. She was pregnant with you, Violet.” One of Kit’s gloved hands drifted down over the top of the raft and patted the hair of the eldest Baudelaire. “I hope I’m half as good a mother as yours was, Violet,” she said.

“You will be,” Klaus said.

“I don’t know,” Kit said. “I was supposed to help you children on that day when you finally reached Briny Beach. I wanted nothing more than to take you away in my taxi to someplace safe. Instead, I threw you into a world of treachery at the Hotel Denouement. And I wanted nothing more than to reunite you with your friends the Quagmires. Instead, I left them behind.” She uttered a wheezy sigh, and fell silent.

Violet continued to guide the raft toward the island, and noticed for the first time that her hands were pushing against the spine of a book whose title she recognized from the library Aunt Josephine kept underneath her bed—*Ivan Lachrymose—Lake Explorer*—while her brother was pushing against *Mushroom Minutiae*, a book that had been part of Fiona’s mycological library. “What happened?” she asked, trying to imagine what strange events would have brought these books to these shores.

“I failed you,” Kit said sadly, and coughed. “Quigley managed to reach the self-sustaining hot air mobile home, just as I hoped he would, and helped his siblings and Hector catch the treacherous eagles in an enormous net, while I met Captain Widdershins and his stepchildren.”

“Fernald and Fiona?” Klaus said, referring to the hook-handed man who had once worked for Count Olaf, and the young woman who had broken his heart. “But they betrayed him—and us.”

“The captain had forgiven the failures of those he had loved,” Kit said, “as I hope you will forgive mine, Baudelaires. We made a desperate attempt to repair the *Queequeg* and reach the Quagmires as their aerial battle continued, and arrived just in time to see the balloons of the self-sustaining hot air mobile home pop under the cruel beaks of the escaping eagles. They tumbled down to the surface of the sea, and crashed into the *Queequeg*. In moments we were all castaways, treading water in the midst of all the items that survived the wreck.” She was silent for a moment. “Fiona was so desperate to reach you, Klaus,” she said. “She wanted you to forgive her as well.”

“Did she—” Klaus could not bear to finish his question. “I mean, what happened next?”

“I don’t know,” Kit admitted. “From the depths of the sea a mysterious figure approached—almost like a question mark, rising out of the water.”

“We saw that on a radar screen,” Violet remembered. “Captain Widdershins refused to tell us what it was.”

“My brother used to call it ‘The Great Unknown,’” Kit said, clasping her belly as the baby kicked violently. “I was terrified, Baudelaires. Quickly I fashioned a Vaporetto of Favorite Detritus, as I’d been trained to do.”

“‘Vaporetto’?” Sunny asked.

“It’s an Italian term for ‘boat,’” Kit said. “It was one of many Italian phrases Monty taught me. A Vaporetto of Favorite Detritus is a way of saving yourself and your favorite things at the same time. I gathered all the books in reach that I enjoyed, tossing the boring ones into the sea, but everyone else wanted to take their chances with the great unknown. I begged the others to climb aboard as the question mark approached, but only Ink managed to reach me. The others…” Her voice trailed off, and for a moment Kit did nothing but wheeze. “In an instant they were gone—either swallowed up or rescued by that mysterious thing.”

“You don’t know what happened to them?” Klaus asked.

Kit shook her head. “All I heard,” she said, “was one of the Quagmires calling Violet’s name.”

Sunny looked into the face of the distraught woman. “Quigley,” the youngest Baudelaire could not help asking “or Duncan?”

“I don’t know,” Kit said again. “I’m sorry, Baudelaires. I failed you. You succeeded in your noble errands at the Hotel Denouement, and saved Dewey and the others, but I don’t know if we’ll ever see the Quagmires and their companions again. I hope you will forgive my failures, and when I see Dewey again I hope he will forgive me, too.”

The Baudelaire orphans looked at one another sadly, realizing it was time at last to tell Kit Snicket the whole story, as she had told them. “We’ll forgive your failures,” Violet said, “if you’ll forgive ours.”

“We failed you, too,” Klaus said. “We had to burn down the Hotel Denouement, and we don’t know if anyone escaped to safety.”

Sunny gripped Kit’s hand in hers. “And Dewey is dead,” she said, and everyone burst into tears. There is a kind of crying I hope you have not experienced, and it is not just crying about something terrible that has happened, but a crying for all of the terrible things that have happened, not just to you but to everyone you know and to everyone you don’t know and even the people you don’t want to know, a crying that cannot be diluted by a brave deed or a kind word, but only by someone holding you as your shoulders shake and your tears run down your face. Sunny held Kit, and Violet held Klaus, and for a minute the four castaways did nothing but weep, letting their tears run down their faces and into the sea, which some have said is nothing but a library of all the tears in history. Kit and the children let their sadness join the sadness of the world, and cried for all of the people who were lost to them. They cried for Dewey Denouement, and for the Quagmire triplets, and for all of their companions and guardians, friends and associates, and for all of the failures they could forgive and all of the treacheries they could endure. They cried for the world, and most of all, of course, the Baudelaire orphans cried for their parents, who they knew, finally, they would never see again. Even though Kit Snicket had not brought news of their parents, her story of the Great Unknown made them see at last that the people who had written all those chapters in *A Series of Unfortunate Events* were gone forever into the great unknown, and that Violet, Klaus, and Sunny would be orphans forever, too.

“Stop,” Kit said finally, through her fading tears. “Stop pushing the raft. I cannot go on.”

“We have to go on,” Violet said.

“We’re almost at the beach,” Klaus said.

“The shelf is flooding,” Sunny said.

“Let it flood,” Kit said. “I can’t do it, Baudelaires. I’ve lost too many people—my parents, my true love, and my brothers.”

At the mention of Kit's brothers, Violet thought to reach into her pocket, and she retrieved the ornate ring, emblazoned with the initial R. "Sometimes the things you've lost can be found again in unexpected places," she said, and held the ring up for Kit to see. The distraught woman removed her gloves, and held the ring in her bare and trembling hand.

"This isn't mine," she said. "It belonged to your mother."

"Before it belonged to our mother," Klaus said, "it belonged to you."

"Its history began before we were born," Kit said, "and it should continue after we die. Give it to my child, Baudelaires. Let my child be part of my history, even if the baby is an orphan, and all alone in the world."

"The baby will not be alone," Violet said fiercely. "If you die, Kit, we will raise this child as our own."

"I could not ask for better," Kit said quietly. "Name the baby after one of your parents, Baudelaires. The custom of my family is to name a baby for someone who has died."

"Ours too," Sunny said, remembering something her father had told her when she had inquired about her own name.

"Our families have always been close," Kit said, "even if we had to stay apart from one another. Now, finally, we are all together, as if we are one family."

"Then let us help you," Sunny said, and with a weepy, wheezy nod, Kit Snicket let the Baudelaires push her Vaporetto of Favorite Detritus off the coastal shelf and onto the shores of the island, where eventually everything arrives, just as the outrigger disappeared on the horizon. The children gazed at the islanders for the last time—at least as far as I know—and then at the cube of books, and tried to imagine how the injured, pregnant, and distraught woman could get to a safe place to birth a child.

"Can you lower yourself down?" Violet asked.

Kit shook her head. “It hurts,” she said, her voice thick with the poisonous fungus.

“We can carry her,” Klaus said, but Kit shook her head again.

“I’m too heavy,” she said weakly. “I could fall from your grasp and hurt the baby.”

“We can invent a way to get you to the shore,” Violet said.

“Yes,” Klaus said. “We’ll just run to the arboretum to find what we need.”

“No time,” Sunny said, and Kit nodded in agreement.

“The baby’s coming quickly,” she said. “Find someone to help you.”

“We’re alone,” Violet said, but then she and her siblings gazed out at the beach where the raft had arrived, and the Baudelaires saw, crawling out of Ishmael’s tent, the one person for whom they had not shed a tear. Sunny slid down to the sand, bringing the stockpot with her, and the three children hurried up the slope to the struggling figure of Count Olaf.

“Hello, orphans,” he said, his voice even wheezier and rougher from the spreading poison of the Medusoid Mycelium. Esmé’s dress had fallen away from his skinny body, and he was crawling on the sand in his regular clothes, with one hand holding a seashell of cordial and the other clutching at his chest. “Are you here to bow before the king of Olaf-Land?”

“We don’t have time for your nonsense,” Violet said. “We need your help.”

Count Olaf’s eyebrow raised, and he gave the children an astonished glare. “*You* need *my* help?” he asked. “What happened to all those island fools?”

“They abandoned us,” Klaus said.

Olaf wheezed horridly, and it took the siblings a moment to realize he was laughing. “How do you like them apples?” he sputtered, using an expression which means “I find this situation quite remarkable.”

“We’ll give you apples,” Sunny said, gesturing to the stockpot, “if you help.”

“I don’t want fruit,” Olaf snarled, and tried to sit up, his hand still clutching his chest. “I want the fortune your parents left behind.”

“The fortune isn’t here,” Violet said. “None of us may ever see a penny of that money.”

“Even if it were here,” Klaus said, “you might not live to enjoy it.”

“Mcguffin,” Sunny said, which meant “Your scheming means nothing in this place.”

Count Olaf raised the seashell to his lips, and the Baudelaires could see that he was trembling. “Then maybe I’ll just stay here,” he said hoarsely. “I’ve lost too much to go on—my parents, my true love, my henchfolk, an enormous amount of money I didn’t earn, even the boat with my name on it.”

The three children looked at one another, remembering their time on that boat and recalling that they had considered throwing him overboard. If Olaf had drowned in the sea, the Medusoid Mycelium might never have threatened the island, although the deadly fungus eventually would have washed up on its shores, and if the villain were dead then there would be no one on the beach who might help Kit Snicket and her child.

Violet knelt on the sand, and grabbed the villain’s shoulders with both hands. “We have to go on,” she said. “Do one good thing in your life, Olaf.”

“I’ve done lots of good things in my life,” he snarled. “I once took in three orphans, and I’ve been considered for several prestigious theatrical awards.”

Klaus knelt down beside his sister, and stared into the villain’s shiny eyes. “You’re the one who made us orphans in the first place,” he said, uttering out loud for the first time a secret all three Baudelaires had kept in their hearts for almost as long as they could remember. Olaf closed his eyes for a moment, grimacing in pain, and then stared slowly at each of the three children in turn.

“Is that what you think?” he said finally.

“We know it,” Sunny said.

“You don’t know anything,” Count Olaf said. “You three children are the same as when I first laid eyes on you. You think you can triumph in this world with nothing more than a keen mind, a pile of books, and the occasional gourmet meal.” He poured one last gulp of cordial into his poisoned mouth before throwing the seashell into the sand. “You’re just like your parents,” he said, and from the shore the children heard Kit Snicket moan.

“You have to help Kit,” Violet said. “The baby is arriving.”

“Kit?” Count Olaf asked, and in one swift gesture he grabbed an apple from the stockpot and took a savage bite. He chewed, wincing in pain, and the Baudelaires listened as his wheezing settled and the poisonous fungus was diluted by their parents’ invention. He took another bite, and another, and then, with a horrible groan, the villain rose to his feet, and the children saw that his chest was soaked with blood.

“You’re hurt,” Klaus said.

“I’ve been hurt before,” Count Olaf said, and he staggered down the slope and waded into the waters of the flooded coastal shelf. In one smooth gesture he lifted Kit from the raft and carried her onto the shores of the island. The distraught woman’s eyes were closed, and as the Baudelaires hurried down to her they were not sure she was alive until Olaf laid her carefully down on the white sands of the beach, and the children saw her chest heaving with breath. The villain stared at Kit for one long moment, and then he leaned down and did a strange thing. As the Baudelaire orphans looked on, Count Olaf gave Kit Snicket a gentle kiss on her trembling mouth.

"Yuck," said Sunny, as Kit's eyes fluttered open.

"I told you," Count Olaf said weakly. "I told you I'd do that one last time."

"You're a wicked man," Kit said. "Do you think one kind act will make me forgive you for your failings?"

The villain stumbled a few steps away, and then sat down on the sand and uttered a deep sigh. "I haven't apologized," he said, looking first at the pregnant woman and then at the Baudelaires. Kit reached out and touched the man's ankle, right on the tattoo of an eye that had haunted the children since they had first seen it. Violet, Klaus, and Sunny looked at the tattoo, remembering all of the times it had been disguised and all the times it had been revealed, and they thought of all the other places they had seen it, for if you looked carefully, the drawing of an eye also spelled out the initials V.F.D., and as the children had investigated the Volunteer Fire Department, first trying to decode the organization's sinister mysteries and then trying to participate in its noble errands, it seemed that these eyes were watching them, though whether the eyes were noble or treacherous, good or evil, seemed even now to be a mystery. The whole story of these eyes, it seemed, might always be hidden from the children, kept in darkness along with all the other eyes watching all the other orphans every day and every night.

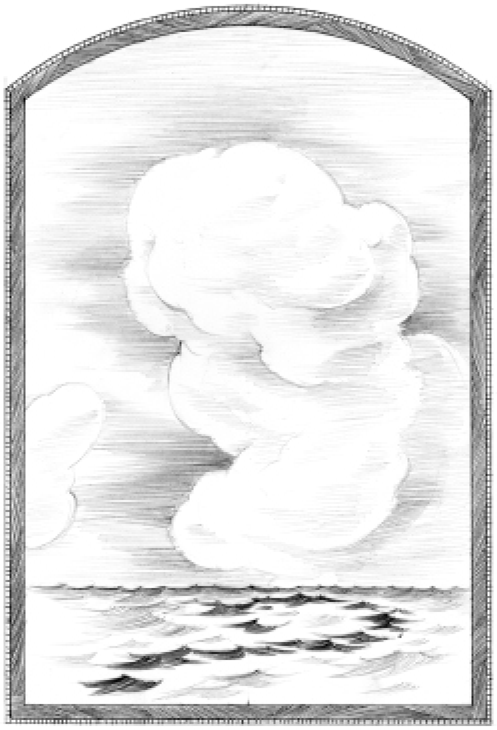
"'The night has a thousand eyes,'" Kit said hoarsely, and lifted her head to face the villain. The Baudelaires could tell by her voice that she was reciting the words of someone else. "'And the day but one; yet the light of the bright world dies with the dying sun. The mind has a thousand eyes, and the heart but one: yet the light of a whole life dies when love is done.'"

Count Olaf gave Kit a faint smile. "You're not the only one who can recite the words of our associates," he said, and then gazed out at the sea. The afternoon was nearly over, and soon the island would be covered in darkness. "'Man hands on misery to man,'" the villain said. "'It deepens like a coastal shelf. Get out as early as you can—'" Here he coughed, a ghastly sound, and his hands clutched his chest. "'And don't have any kids yourself,'" he finished, and uttered a short, sharp laugh. Then the villain's story came to an end. Olaf lay back on the sand, far from the treachery of the world, and the children stood on the beach and stared into his face. His eyes shone brightly, and his mouth opened as if he wanted to tell them something, but the Baudelaire orphans never heard Count Olaf say another word.

Kit gave a cry of pain, thick with poisonous fungus, and clutched her heaving belly, and the Baudelaires hurried to help her. They did not even notice when Count Olaf closed his eyes for the last time, and perhaps this is a good time for you to close your eyes, too, not just to avoid reading the end of the Baudelaires' story, but to imagine the beginning of another. It is likely your own eyes were closed when you were born, so that you left the safe place of your mother's womb—or, if you are a seahorse, your father's yolk sac—and joined the treachery of the world without seeing exactly where you were going. You did not yet know the people who were helping you make your way here, or the people who would shelter you as your life began, when you were even smaller and more delicate and demanding than you are now. It seems strange that you would do such a thing, and leave yourself in the care of strangers for so long, only gradually opening your eyes to see what all the fuss was about, and yet this is the way nearly everyone comes into the world. Perhaps if we saw what was ahead of us, and glimpsed the crimes, follies, and misfortunes that would befall us later on, we would all stay in our mother's wombs, and then there would be nobody in the world but a great number of very fat, very irritated women. In any case, this is how all our stories begin, in darkness with our eyes closed, and all our stories end the same way, too, with all of us uttering some last words—or perhaps someone else's—before slipping back into darkness as our series of unfortunate events comes to an end. And in this way, with the journey taken by Kit Snicket's baby, we reach the end of A Series of Unfortunate Events as well. For some time, Kit Snicket's labor was very difficult, and it seemed to the children that things were moving in an aberrant—the word "aberrant" here means "very, very wrong, and causing much grief"—direction. But finally, into the world came a baby girl, just as, I'm very, very sorry to say, her mother, and my sister, slipped away from the world after a long night of suffering—but also a night of joy, as the birth of a baby is always good news, no matter how much bad news the baby will hear later. The sun rose over the coastal shelf, which would not flood again for another year, and the Baudelaire orphans held the baby on the shore and watched as her eyes opened for the first time. Kit Snicket's daughter squinted at the sunrise, and tried to imagine where in the world she was, and of course as she wondered this she began to cry. The girl, named after the Baudelaires' mother, howled and howled, and as her series of unfortunate events began, this history of the Baudelaire orphans ended.

This is not to say, of course, that the Baudelaire orphans died that day. They were far too busy. Although they were still children, the Baudelaires were parents now, and there was quite a lot to do. Violet designed and built the equipment necessary for raising an infant, using the library of detritus stored in the shade of the apple tree. Klaus searched the enormous bookcase for information on child care, and kept careful track of the baby's progress. Sunny herded and milked the wild sheep, to provide nourishment for the baby, and used the whisk Friday had given her to make soft foods as the baby's teeth came in. And all three Baudelaires planted seeds from the bitter apples all over the island, to chase away any traces of the Medusoid Mycelium—even though they remembered it grew best in small, enclosed spaces—so the deadly fungus had no chance to harm the child and so the island would remain as safe as it was on the day they arrived. These chores took all day, and at night, while the baby was learning to sleep, the Baudelaires would sit together in the two large reading chairs and take turns reading out loud from the book their parents had left behind, and sometimes they would flip to the back of the book, and add a few lines to the history themselves. While reading and writing, the siblings found many answers for which they had been looking, although each answer, of course, only brought forth another mystery, as there were many details of the Baudelaires' lives that seemed like a strange, unreadable shape of some great unknown. But this did not concern them as much as you might think. One cannot spend forever sitting and solving the mysteries of one's history, and no matter how much one reads, the whole story can never be told. But it was enough. Reading their parents' words was, under the circumstances, the best for which the Baudelaire orphans could hope.

As the night grew later they would drop off to sleep, just as their parents did, in the chairs in the secret space beneath the roots of the bitter apple tree, in the arboretum on an island far, far from the treachery of the world. Several hours later, of course, the baby would wake up and fill the space with confused and hungry cries. The Baudelaires took turns, and while the other two children slept, one Baudelaire would carry the baby, in a sling Violet had designed, out of the arboretum and up to the top of the brae, where they would sit, infant and parent, and have breakfast while staring at the sea. Sometimes they would visit Kit Snicket's grave, where they would lay a few wildflowers, or the grave of Count Olaf, where they would merely stand silent for a few moments. In many ways, the lives of the Baudelaire orphans that year is not unlike my own, now that I have concluded my investigation. Like Violet, like Klaus, and like Sunny, I visit certain graves, and often spend my mornings standing on a brae, staring out at the same sea. It is not the whole story, of course, but it is enough. Under the circumstances, it is the best for which you can hope.



CHAPTER
Fourteen

The last entry in the Baudelaire parents' handwriting in *A Series of Unfortunate Events* reads as follows:

> *As we suspected, we are to be castaways once more. The others believe that the island should stay far from the treachery of the world, and so this safe place is too dangerous for us. We will leave by a boat B has built and named after me. I am heartbroken, but I have been heartbroken before, and this might be the best for which I can hope. We cannot truly shelter our children, here or anywhere else, and so it might be best for us and for the baby to immerse ourselves in the world. By the way, if it is a girl we will name her Violet, and if it is a boy we will name him Lemony.*

The Baudelaire orphans read this entry one evening after a supper of seaweed salad, crab cakes, and roast lamb, and when Violet finished reading all three children laughed. Even Kit's baby, sitting on Sunny's knee, uttered a happy shriek.

"Lemony?" Violet repeated. "They would have named me Lemony? Where did they get that idea?"

"From someone who died, presumably," Klaus said. "Remember the family custom?"

"Lemony Baudelaire," Sunny tried, and the baby laughed again. She was nearly a year old, and looked very much like her mother.

"They never told us about a Lemony," Violet said, and ran her hair through her hands. She had been repairing the water filtration system all day and was quite tired.

Klaus poured his sisters more coconut milk, which the children preferred to drink fresh. “They didn’t tell us a lot of things,” he said. “What do you think it means, ‘I’ve been heartbroken before’?”

“You know what ‘heartbroken’ means,” Sunny said, and then nodded as the baby murmured “Abelard.” The youngest Baudelaire was best at deciphering the infant’s somewhat unusual way of speaking.

“I think it means we should leave,” Violet said.

“Leave the island?” Klaus said. “And go where?”

“Anywhere,” Violet said. “We can’t stay here forever. There’s everything we might need, but it’s not right to be so far from the world.”

“And its treachery?” Sunny asked.

“You’d think we would have had enough treachery for a lifetime,” Klaus said, “but there’s more to life than safety.”

“Our parents left,” Violet said. “Maybe we should honor their wishes.”

“Chekrio?” the baby said, and the Baudelaires considered her for a moment. Kit’s daughter was growing up very quickly, and she eagerly explored the island at every opportunity. All three siblings had to keep a close eye on her, particularly in the arboretum, which was still heaping with detritus even after a year of cataloging. Many of the items in the enormous library were dangerous for babies, of course, but the infant had never had a serious injury. The baby had heard about danger, too, mostly from the register of crimes, follies, and misfortunes of mankind from which the Baudelaires read out loud each evening, although they had not told the infant the whole story. She did not know all of the Baudelaires’ secrets, and indeed there were some she would never know.

“We can’t shelter her forever,” Klaus said. “In any case, treachery will wash up on these shores.”

“I’m surprised it hasn’t already,” Violet said. “Plenty of things have been shipwrecked here, but we haven’t seen a single castaway.”

“If we leave,” Sunny asked, “what will we find?”

The Baudelaires fell silent. Because no castaways had arrived in the year, they had little news of the world, aside from a few scraps of newspaper that had survived a terrible storm. Judging from the articles, there were still villains loose in the world, although a few volunteers also appeared to have survived all of the troubles that had brought the children to the island. The articles, however, were from *The Daily Punctilio*, and so the children could not be sure they were accurate. For all they knew, the islanders had spread the Medusoid Mycelium, and the entire world might be poisoned. This, however, seemed unlikely, as the world, no matter how monstrously it may be threatened, has never been known to succumb entirely. The Baudelaires also thought of all the people they hoped to see again, although, sadly, this also seemed unlikely, though not impossible.

“We won’t know until we get there,” Violet said.

“Well, if we’re leaving, we’d better hurry,” Klaus said. He stood up and walked to the bench, where the middle Baudelaire had fashioned a calendar he believed to be fairly accurate. “The coastal shelf will flood soon.”

“We won’t need much,” Sunny said. “We have quite a bit of nonperishable food.”

“I’ve cataloged quite a bit of naval equipment,” Violet said.

“I have some good maps,” Klaus said, “but we should also make room for some of our favorite detritus. I have some novels by P. G. Wodehouse I’ve been meaning to get to.”

“Blueprints,” Violet said thoughtfully.

“My whisk,” Sunny said, looking at the item that Friday had smuggled her long ago, which had turned out to be a very handy utensil even after the baby had outgrown whisked foods.

“Cake!” shrieked the baby, and her guardians laughed.

“Do we take this?” Violet asked, holding up the book from which she had read out loud.

“I don’t think so,” Klaus said. “Perhaps another castaway will arrive, and continue the history.”

“In any case,” Sunny said, “they’ll have something to read.”

“So we’re really leaving,” Violet said, and they really were. After a good night’s sleep, the Baudelaires began to prepare for their voyage, and it was true they didn’t need much. Sunny was able to pack a great deal of food that would be perfect for the journey, and even managed to sneak in a few luxuries, such as some roe she had harvested from local fishes, and a somewhat bitter but still tasty apple pie. Klaus rolled several maps into a neat cylinder, and added a number of useful and entertaining items from the vast library. Violet added some blueprints and equipment to the pile, and then selected a boat from all the shipwrecks that lay in the arboretum. The eldest Baudelaire had been surprised to find that the boat that looked best for the task was the one on which they had arrived, although by the time she was done repairing and readying it for the voyage she was not surprised after all. She repaired the hull of the boat, and fastened new sails to the masts, and finally she looked at the nameplate reading COUNT OLAF, and with a small frown, she tore through the tape and removed it. As the children had noticed on their voyage to the island, there was another nameplate underneath, and when Violet read what it said, and called her siblings and adopted daughter over to see, yet another question about their lives was answered, and yet another mystery had begun.

Finally, the day for departure arrived, and as the coastal shelf began to flood the Baudelaires carried the boat—or, as Uncle Monty might have put it, “vaporetto”—down to the beach and began to load all of their supplies. Violet, Klaus, and Sunny gazed at the white sands of the beach, where new apple trees were beginning to grow. The children spent nearly all of their time in the arboretum, and so the side of the island where the colony had been now felt like the far side of the island, rather than where their parents had lived. “Are we ready to immerse ourselves in the world?” Violet asked.

“I just hope we don’t immerse ourselves in the sea,” Klaus said, with a small smile.

“Me too,” Sunny said, and smiled back at her brother.

“Where’s the baby?” Violet said. “I want to make sure these life jackets I’ve designed will fit properly.”

“She wanted to say good-bye to her mother,” Sunny said. “She’ll be along soon.”

Sure enough, the tiny figure of Kit’s daughter could be seen crawling over the brae, toward the children and their boat. The Baudelaires watched her approach, wondering what the next chapter in this infant’s life would be, and indeed that is difficult to say. There are some who say that the Baudelaires rejoined V.F.D. and are engaged in brave errands to this day, perhaps under different names to avoid being captured. There are others who say that they perished at sea, although rumors of one’s death crop up so often, and are so often revealed to be untrue. But in any case, as my investigation is over, we have indeed reached the last chapter of the Baudelaires’ story, even if the Baudelaires had not. The three children climbed into the boat, and waited for the baby to crawl to the water’s edge, where she could pull herself into a standing position by clinging to the back of the boat. Soon the coastal shelf would flood, and the Baudelaire orphans would be on their way, immersing themselves in the world and leaving this story forever. Even the baby clutching the boat, whose story had just begun, would soon vanish from this chronicle, after uttering just a few words.

“Vi!” she cried, which was her way of greeting Violet. “Kla! Sun!”

“We wouldn’t leave without you,” Violet said, smiling down at the baby.

“Come aboard,” Klaus said, talking to her as if she were an adult.

“You little thing,” Sunny said, using a term of endearment she had made up herself.

The baby paused, and looked at the back of the boat, where the nameplate had been affixed. She had no way of knowing this, of course, but the nameplate had been nailed to the back of the boat by a person standing on the very spot she was standing—at least, as far as my research has shown. The infant was standing on a spot in someone else's story, during a moment of her own, but she was thinking neither of the story far in the past nor of her own, which stretched into the future like the open sea. She was gazing at the nameplate, and her forehead was wrinkled in concentration. Finally, she uttered a word. The Baudelaire orphans gasped when they heard it, but they could not say for sure whether she was reading the word out loud or merely stating her own name, and indeed they never learned this. Perhaps this last word was the baby's first secret, joining the secrets the Baudelaires were keeping from the baby, and all the other secrets immersed in the world. Perhaps it is better not to know precisely what was meant by this word, as some things are better left in the great unknown. There are some words, of course, that are better left unsaid—but not, I believe, the word uttered by my niece, a word which here means that the story is over.

Beatrice.

To My Kind Editor:

The end of THE END can be found at the end of THE END

With all due respect,

Lemony Snicket

Lemony Snicket

A Series of Unfortunate Events

THE BAD BEGINNING

THE REPTILE ROOM

THE WIDE WINDOW

THE MISERABLE MILL

THE AUSTERE ACADEMY

THE ERSATZ ELEVATOR

THE VILE VILLAGE

THE HOSTILE HOSPITAL

THE CARNIVOROUS CARNIVAL

THE SLIPPERY SLOPE

THE GRIM GROTTO

THE PENULTIMATE PERIL

THE END

Credits

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The End

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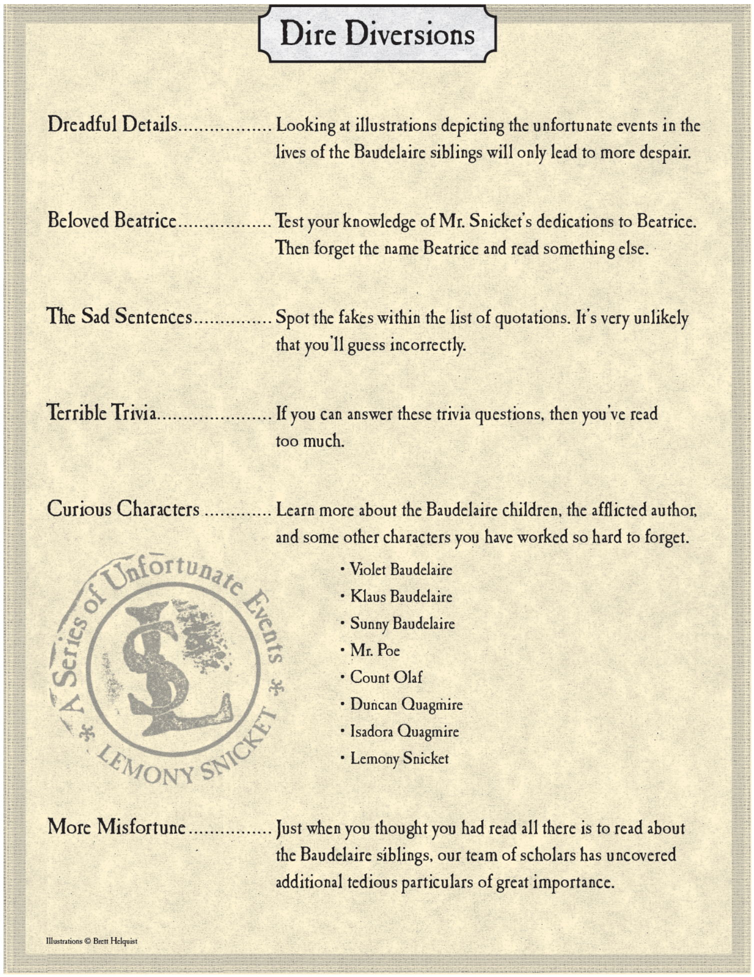
Dire Diversions



Dire Diversions

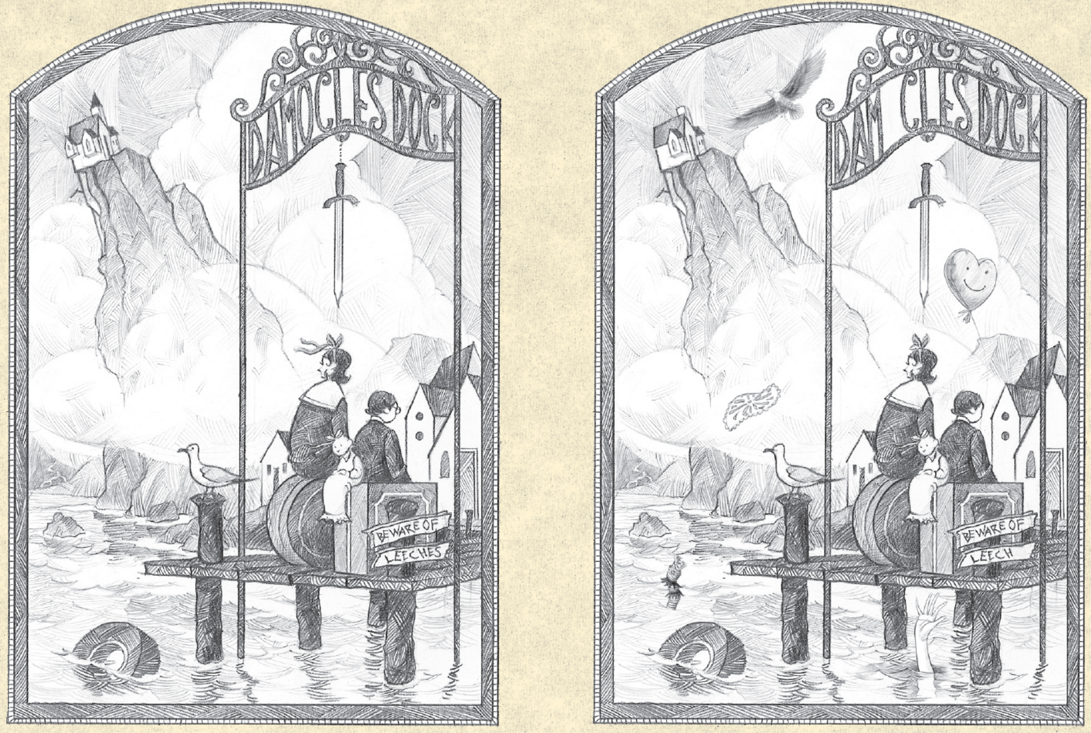
Dreadful Details	Looking at illustrations depicting the unfortunate events in the lives of the Baudelaire siblings will only lead to more despair.
Beloved Beatrice	Test your knowledge of Mr. Snicket's dedications to Beatrice. Then forget the name Beatrice and read something else.
The Sad Sentences	Spot the fakes within the list of quotations. It's very unlikely that you'll guess incorrectly.
Terrible Trivia	If you can answer these trivia questions, then you've read too much.
Curious Characters	Learn more about the Baudelaire children, the afflicted author, and some other characters you have worked so hard to forget. • Violet Baudelaire • Klaus Baudelaire • Sunny Baudelaire • Mr. Poe • Count Olaf • Duncan Quagmire • Isadora Quagmire • Lemony Snicket
More Misfortune	Just when you thought you had read all there is to read about the Baudelaire siblings, our team of scholars has uncovered additional tedious particulars of great importance.

A Series of Unfortunate Events * LEMONY SNICKET *

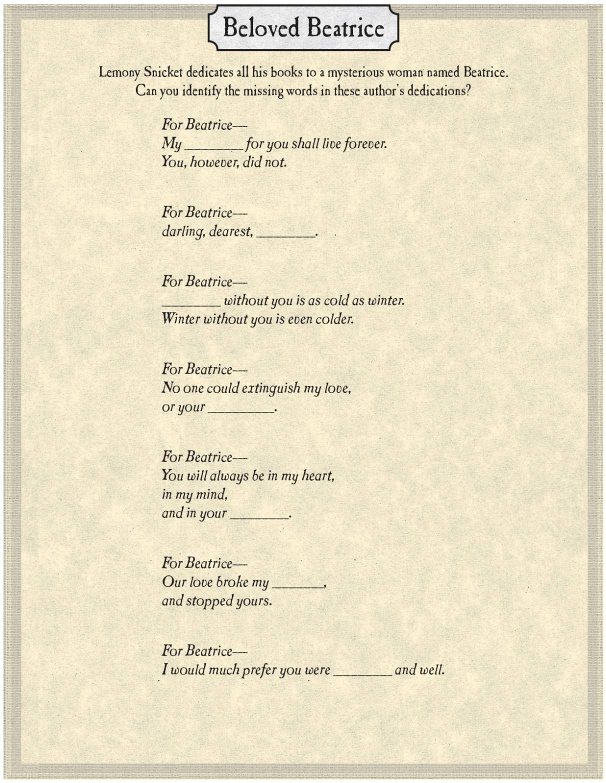
Illustrations © Brett Helquist

Dreadful Details

There are thirteen differences between the two pictures shown below. How many differences can you find? Keep your eyes peeled.


DAMOCLES DOCK
BEWARE OF LEECHES
DAM CLES DOCK
BEWARE OF LEECH

Give up already? Click here to spoil the answers for everyone.



Beloved Beatrice

Lemony Snicket dedicates all his books to a mysterious woman named Beatrice.
Can you identify the missing words in these author's dedications?

For Beatrice—
My ________ for you shall live forever.
You, however, did not.

For Beatrice—
darling, dearest, ________.

For Beatrice—
________ without you is as cold as winter.
Winter without you is even colder.

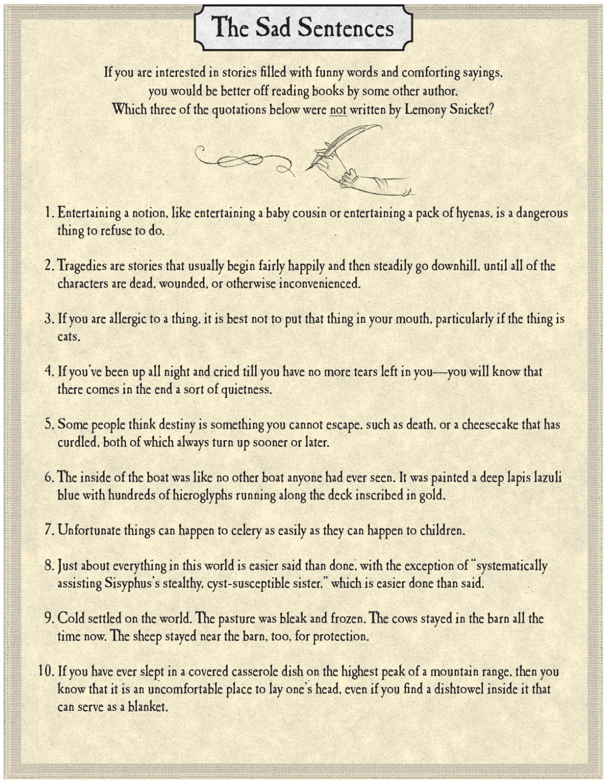
For Beatrice—
No one could extinguish my love,
or your _________.

For Beatrice—
You will always be in my heart,
in my mind,
and in your ________.

For Beatrice—
Our love broke my _______,
and stopped yours.

For Beatrice—
I would much prefer you were ________ and well.

Beatrice is rolling over in her grave. Click here.

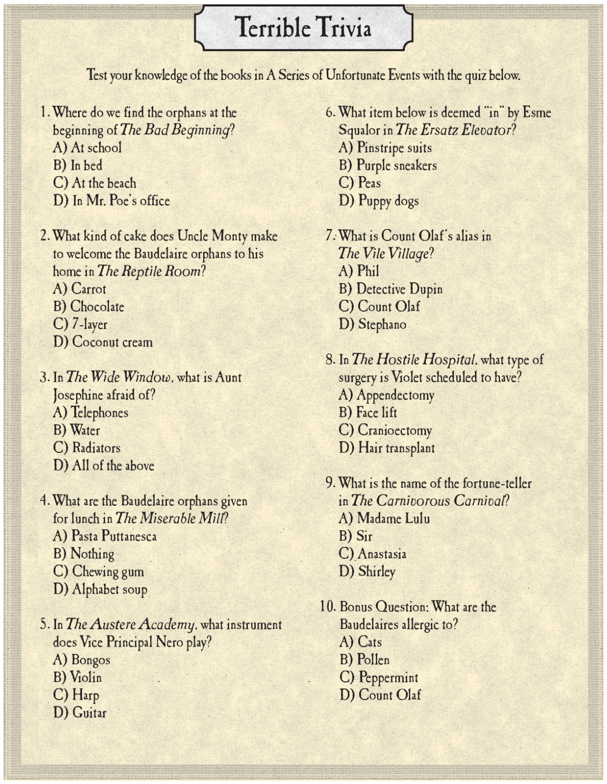


The Sad Sentences

If you are interested in stories filled with funny words and comforting sayings,
you would be better off reading books by some other author.
Which three of the quotations below were not written by Lemony Snicket?

1. Entertaining a notion, like entertaining a baby cousin or entertaining a pack of hyenas, is a dangerous thing to refuse to do.
2. Tragedies are stories that usually begin fairly happily and then steadily go downhill, until all of the characters are dead, wounded, or otherwise inconvenienced.
3. If you are allergic to a thing, it is best not to put that thing in your mouth, particularly if the thing is cats.
4. If you've been up all night and cried till you have no more tears left in you—you will know that there comes in the end a sort of quietness.
5. Some people think destiny is something you cannot escape, such as death, or a cheesecake that has curdled, both of which always turn up sooner or later.
6. The inside of the boat was like no other boat anyone had ever seen. It was painted a deep lapis lazuli blue with hundreds of hieroglyphs running along the deck inscribed in gold.
7. Unfortunate things can happen to celery as easily as they can happen to children.
8. Just about everything in this world is easier said than done, with the exception of "systematically assisting Sisyphus's stealthy, cyst-susceptible sister," which is easier done than said.
9. Cold settled on the world. The pasture was bleak and frozen. The cows stayed in the barn all the time now. The sheep stayed near the barn, too, for protection.
10. If you have ever slept in a covered casserole dish on the highest peak of a mountain range, then you know that it is an uncomfortable place to lay one's head, even if you find a dishtowel inside it that can serve as a blanket.

These answers will not bring world peace.



Terrible Trivia

Test your knowledge of the books in A Series of Unfortunate Events with the quiz below.

1. Where do we find the orphans at the beginning of *The Bad Beginning*?
   A) At school
   B) In bed
   C) At the beach
   D) In Mr. Poe's office

2. What kind of cake does Uncle Monty make to welcome the Baudelaire orphans to his home in *The Reptile Room*?
   A) Carrot
   B) Chocolate
   C) 7-layer
   D) Coconut cream

3. In *The Wide Window*, what is Aunt Josephine afraid of?
   A) Telephones
   B) Water
   C) Radiators
   D) All of the above

4. What are the Baudelaire orphans given for lunch in *The Miserable Mill*?
   A) Pasta Puttanesca
   B) Nothing
   C) Chewing gum
   D) Alphabet soup

5. In *The Austere Academy*, what instrument does Vice Principal Nero play?
   A) Bongos
   B) Violin
   C) Harp
   D) Guitar

6. What item below is deemed "in" by Esme Squalor in *The Ersatz Elevator*?
   A) Pinstripe suits
   B) Purple sneakers
   C) Peas
   D) Puppy dogs

7. What is Count Olaf's alias in *The Vile Village*?
   A) Phil
   B) Detective Dupin
   C) Count Olaf
   D) Stephano

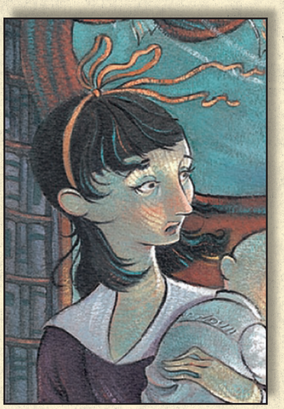
8. In *The Hostile Hospital*, what type of surgery is Violet scheduled to have?
   A) Appendectomy
   B) Face lift
   C) Cranioectomy
   D) Hair transplant

9. What is the name of the fortune-teller in *The Carnivorous Carnival*?
   A) Madame Lulu
   B) Sir
   C) Anastasia
   D) Shirley

10. Bonus Question: What are the Baudelaires allergic to?
   A) Cats
   B) Pollen
   C) Peppermint
   D) Count Olaf

If you need to click here for the correct answers, then you've clearly spent your time wisely reading something else.

Violet Baudelaire



Age: 14.

Occupation: Inventor.

Distinguishing Characteristics: Often seen with her hair up in a ribbon, to keep it out of her eyes.

Favorite Hobby: Working on mechanical devices.

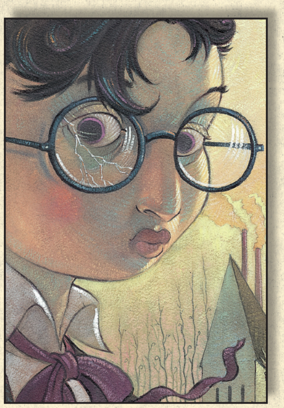
Favorite Book: *The Life of Nikola Tesla*.

Least Favorite Color: Very bright pink.

Least Favorite Food: Peppermints (due to an allergy).

Fond Hope: To find a safe place to live in happiness with her siblings.

Klaus Baudelaire



Age: 12.

Occupation: Researcher.

Distinguishing Characteristics: Usually wearing glasses and holding a book.

Favorite Hobby: Reading.

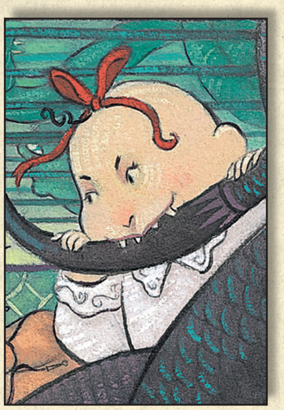
Favorite Book: *The Complete History of Absolutely Everything, Volume 127 - Cauldron to Caution* (lost in the fire that destroyed the Baudelaire mansion).

Least Favorite Color: Unusually rosy pink.

Least Favorite Food: Parsley soda.

Fond Hope: To bring Count Olaf to justice.

Sunny Baudelaire



Age: Infancy.

Occupation: Infant.

Distinguishing Characteristics: Four sharp teeth, unusual manner of speaking.

Favorite Hobby: Biting things.

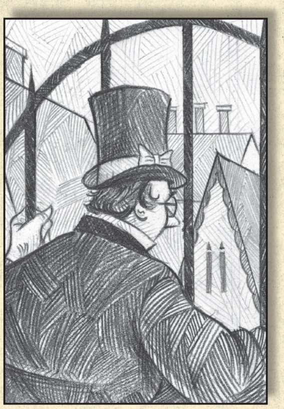
Favorite Book: *From Molars to Incisors: A Pictorial History of the Tooth.*

Least Favorite Color: Particularly garish pink.

Least Favorite Food: Anything limp.

Fond Hope: To solve the web of mystery and woe that seems to surround the Baudelaires wherever they go.

Mr. Poe



Age: Middle.

Occupation: Banker.

Distinguishing Characteristics: Always coughing into a handkerchief.

Favorite Hobby: Banking.

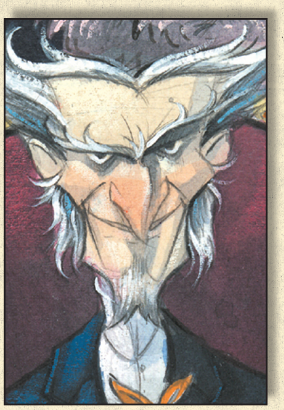
Favorite Book: *Banking.*

Least Favorite Color: Has no time to worry about such matters.

Least Favorite Food: Has no time to worry about such matters.

Fond Hope: That his bank, Mulctuary Money Management, may continue to prosper. Oh yes, and that the Baudelaire children are taken care of.

Count Olaf



Age: Old enough to know better.

Occupation: Actor/Murderer.

Distinguishing Characteristics: One eyebrow, tattoo of an eye on his ankle.

Favorite Hobby: Snatching fortunes away from small children.

Favorite Book: *How I Snatched the Baudelaire Fortune*, by Count Olaf (still being written).

Least Favorite Color: Anything clean.

Least Favorite Food: Anything he had to buy and cook himself.

Fond Hope: To increase his personal fortune, preferably at the expense of others.

Duncan Quagmire

Age: Same as Isadora Quagmire.

Occupation: Journalist/Triplet.

Distinguishing Characteristics: Always carries a dark green notebook.

Favorite Hobby: Taking notes.

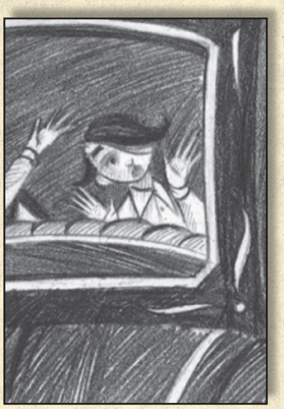
Favorite Book: *The Portable Dorothy Parker*.

Least Favorite Color: Excruciatingly cheerful pink.

Least Favorite Food: Rhubarb.

Fond Hope: To tell the Baudelaires the secret of V.F.D.

Isadora Quagmire



Age: Same as Duncan Quagmire.

Occupation: Poet/Triplet.

Distinguishing Characteristics: Always carries a black notebook.

Favorite Hobby: Composing couplets.

Favorite Book: *Les Fleurs du Mal.*

Least Favorite Color: Painfully perky pink.

Least Favorite Food: Thousand Island dressing.

Fond Hope: To escape from Count Olaf's clutches.

Lemony Snicket

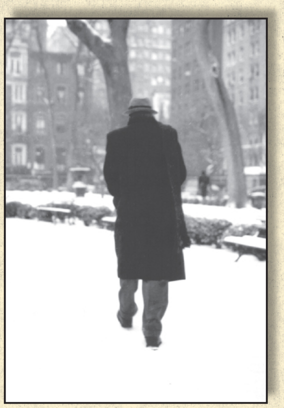


Photo © Meredith Heuer

Age: Older than you.

Occupation: Writer.

Distinguishing Characteristics: Elusiveness.

Favorite Hobby: Taxidermy, playing the harpsichord.

Favorite Book: *The Bears' Famous Invasion of Sicily.*

Least Favorite Color: Pink.

Least Favorite Food: Arsenic.

Fond Hope: To make the general public aware of the troubles of the three Baudelaire children.

More Misfortune

Klaus's Reading List

Klaus's extensive knowledge of books and highly sophisticated research skills have proven helpful in escaping precarious situations.

- *Advanced Ocular Science*
- *Basic Rules of Grammar and Punctuation*
- *Big Peruvian Book of Small Peruvian Snakes, The*
- *Boots Were In in 1812*
- *Bottom of Lake Lachrymose, The*
- *Care and Feeding of the Androgynous Cobra, The*
- *Complete History of Surgical Tools, A*
- *Correct Spelling of Every English Word That Ever, Ever Existed, The*
- *Encyclopedia Hypnotica*
- *Encyclopedia of Escaping Arson, The*
- *Handbook for Advanced Apostrophe Use*
- *History of Lucky Smells Lumbermill, The*
- *History of the Damocles Dock Region, The*
- *How Water Is Made*
- *Inheritance Law and Its Implications*
- *Introduction to Large Lizards, An*
- *Ivan Lachrymose—Lake Explorer*
- *Lachrymose Atlas, A*
- *Lachrymose Trout*
- *Nuptial Law*
- *Paltryville Constitution, The*
- *Tides of Lake Lachrymose*

INHERITANCE
LAW
NUPTIAL
LAW

More Misfortune

Sunny's Vocabulary Guide

Sunny, the youngest of the three Baudelaire siblings, is an infant. As is common of children her age, Sunny's speech is difficult to understand unless you know her very well.

Akrofil: Someone who is not afraid of heights

Bax: Nervous

Beiru: What about me?

Chittol: True

Chonex: All alone

Ecrif: Scared

Fut: I do not!

Futa: I agree.

Gice: Don't hurt him!

Ging: I would rather eat dirt.

Gyba: You're a genius.

Keeb: I like fruit.

Manco: Help

Minda: Don't be ridiculous.

Minka: Answer it.

Neebdes: Can you explain that a bit more?

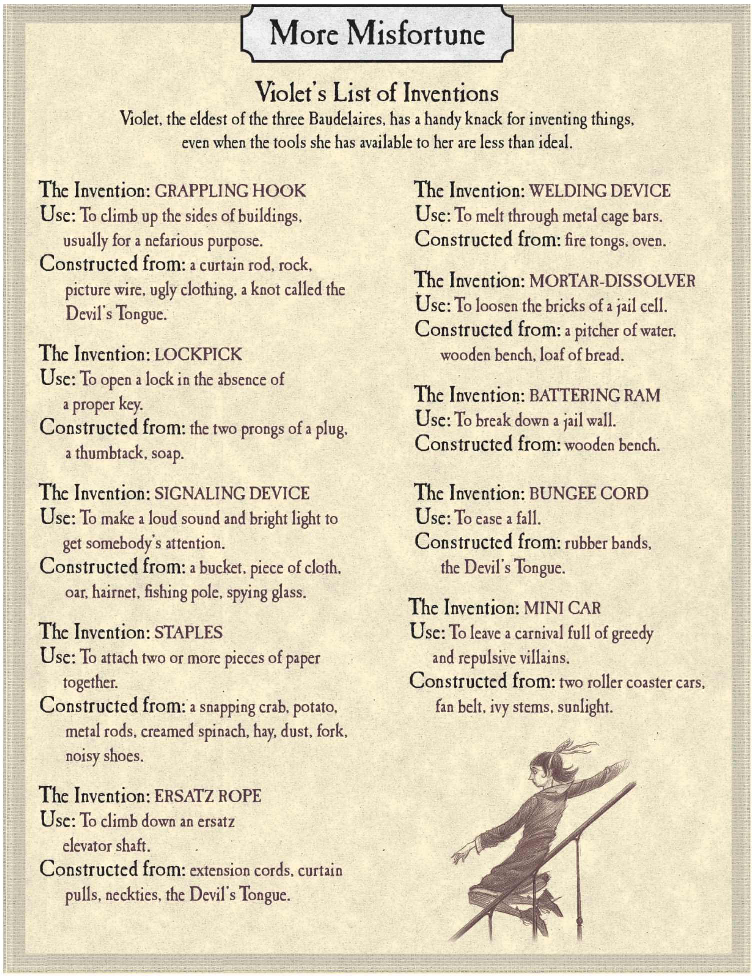
Pietrisycamollaviadelrechiotemexity: I must admit I don't have the faintest idea what is going on.

Reauhop: Good luck.

Sos: Emergency

Tretchev: Welcome home.

Wolick: We're happy to be of assistance.



More Misfortune

Violet's List of Inventions

Violet, the eldest of the three Baudelaires, has a handy knack for inventing things, even when the tools she has available to her are less than ideal.

The Invention: GRAPPLING HOOK
Use: To climb up the sides of buildings, usually for a nefarious purpose.
Constructed from: a curtain rod, rock, picture wire, ugly clothing, a knot called the Devil's Tongue.

The Invention: LOCKPICK
Use: To open a lock in the absence of a proper key.
Constructed from: the two prongs of a plug, a thumbtack, soap.

The Invention: SIGNALING DEVICE
Use: To make a loud sound and bright light to get somebody's attention.
Constructed from: a bucket, piece of cloth, oar, hairnet, fishing pole, spying glass.

The Invention: STAPLES
Use: To attach two or more pieces of paper together.
Constructed from: a snapping crab, potato, metal rods, creamed spinach, hay, dust, fork, noisy shoes.

The Invention: ERSATZ ROPE
Use: To climb down an ersatz elevator shaft.
Constructed from: extension cords, curtain pulls, neckties, the Devil's Tongue.

The Invention: WELDING DEVICE
Use: To melt through metal cage bars.
Constructed from: fire tongs, oven.

The Invention: MORTAR-DISSOLVER
Use: To loosen the bricks of a jail cell.
Constructed from: a pitcher of water, wooden bench, loaf of bread.

The Invention: BATTERING RAM
Use: To break down a jail wall.
Constructed from: wooden bench.

The Invention: BUNGEE CORD
Use: To ease a fall.
Constructed from: rubber bands, the Devil's Tongue.

The Invention: MINI CAR
Use: To leave a carnival full of greedy and repulsive villains.
Constructed from: two roller coaster cars, fan belt, ivy stems, sunlight.

Appalling Answers

Appalling Answers

Dreadful Details

1. Missing window on house
2. Missing steeple
3. Bird in sky
4. Missing “O” in sign
5. Missing chain holding sword
6. Balloon in sky
7. Doily floating
8. Violet’s hair ribbon is shorter
9. Seagull missing eye
10. Klaus missing glasses
11. Sign reads “leech” instead of “leeches”
12. Hand in water
13. Leech in water

Beloved Beatrice

Love; dead; Summer; house; grave; heart; alive

The Sad Sentences

Quotations 4, 6, and 9 are not by Lemony Snicket. The correct sources are:

1. *The Vile Village*
2. *The Carnivorous Carnival*
3. *The Wide Window*
4. *The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe* by C. S. Lewis
5. *The Penultimate Peril*
6. *Septimus Heap, Book One: Magyk* by Angie Sage
7. *The Austere Academy*
8. *The Hostile Hospital*
9. *Charlotte’s Web* by E. B. White
10. *The Slippery Slope*

Terrible Trivia

1. C) At the beach
2. D) Coconut cream
3. D) All of the above
4. C) Chewing gum
5. B) Violin
6. A) Pinstripe suits
7. B) Detective Dupin
8. C) Cranioectomy
9. A) Madame Lulu
10. C) Peppermint

A SERIES of
UNFORTUNATE
EVENTS

About the Author

LEMONY SNICKET is often despondent, mostly about his published research, which includes A SERIES OF UNFORTUNATE EVENTS and THE COMPOSER IS DEAD.

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